

Minister's children frequently grow up playing a game called "having a meeting". It is a very natural game for them to play because they see Christians frequently having a meeting. Christianity is a social religion. Entering into fellowship with God leads us to fellowship with God's people. Fellowship requires gathering together. It is the very meaning of the word "church". We make it a habit and practice of meeting together regularly. In fact the Bible warns us not to neglect meeting together (Heb 10:24-25). Thus as we get involved in Christian ministry we are called upon to take responsibilities for meetings. Hence this discussion paper on "How to run a meeting".

### 1. Set the Goals

The first key to running a meeting is the apprehension of the goals. Frequently Christian meetings are conducted for no purpose. Often the purpose was set back in the dim, dark past but has been lost through the years of faithful attendance. This is especially true of those meetings that occur regularly: the weekly Bible study, prayer meeting, ladies auxiliary, youth fellowship, Sunday school, church service. It is the aimlessness of these kinds of regular meetings that frequently reduces them to boredom. We go because we go and we meet because we meet.

The goal of any particular meeting may have to be set within the context of the goal of meeting regularly. However, it is important to apprehend clearly what the goal is in meeting regularly and what the goal is in meeting this time in particular. Irregular, or one-off extraordinary, meetings usually have more clearly defined goals. Thus they become easier to conduct successfully.

However, rarely do we have a meeting with only one goal in mind. Sometimes, we can gather together to resolve a particular issue. Usually we gather together for several different purposes, and in the context of a regular meeting we can be gathering for many different purposes. This variety and diversity of goals cannot be avoided but can lead to failure to achieve anything and frustration amongst members. The conflict of varied goals needs to be resolved with some sense of a hierarchy of goals. If we are to successfully run a meeting then we need to be clear about the goals and their relative importance.

Let us examine the goals involved in next Friday night's youth programme. There are certain ongoing goals of the church that provides this programme. They wish the teenage members of the church families to be provided with a suitable social programme. They want the children of the congregation to be given every opportunity to establish a peer group of Christian friends. They also want these children of the congregation to be taught the things of God in a context which will appeal to them. However, the congregation would have other goals as well; such as training of their leaders and the outreach into the youth community. They would like the Gospel to be spread into the high schools and the friends of the children of the congregation.

The leaders may have the goal of evangelism as a higher priority than that of the church. They do not perceive the insecurity of Christian parents about the children of the congregation. They are more concerned in establishing a context where non-Christians can come and feel comfortable. The individual teenagers have another set of goals. Some are there because it is the only thing their parents will let them go out to. Some are there because their friends go. Some are there

because they wish to establish friends. Some are there because they have a Christian perception of ministry to their fellow high school students. Some are there because that is what you do on a Friday night.

For this regular meeting to be successful in achieving anybody's goals it requires the group to establish some sense of identity. Some pattern of meeting and behaviour needs to be established which can become identifiably the group life. Therefore any activity that needs to be undertaken on any particular night must to some extent relate to the ongoing group identity. (If the Gospel is not central to this sense of group identity it will be very difficult to bring it in later.) The way the group can include new members, especially each year coming up from primary school, is an important process in group identity.

However, any particular night in which we may be called upon to conduct the meeting requires a goal. This goal must relate to the year's programme or the overall goals. So the first meeting of the year may be one at which we will spend more time with activities that integrate new members than a meeting in the middle of the year. It may also be a time to establish the norms of the group and what we consider to be the most important aspects of our group. A meeting in the middle of the year might be associated with a particular evangelistic push. Therefore we would conduct the meeting in a way that would make the outsider feel comfortable and able to hear and perceive the Gospel clearly. Again these are the simple ones, the harder ones are the regular, weekly, nothing special meetings. However, a good programme and/or syllabus does enable us to make each meeting a special purposeful event.

## 2. Set the agenda from the Goals

Once having established the goals clearly in your mind it is possible to work out an agenda for the evening. The agenda should reflect these goals and will also reflect the broader goals of the ministry. The agenda needs to be clearly set in your own mind even if it is not on paper. It is a great help to the team you are working with if you can share the agenda with them. It frequently helps the whole group if they have some knowledge of the agenda.

Frequently people set goals that are not reflected in the agenda. They want to evangelise outsiders. However the agenda is so filled with Christianised culture to make sure that no outsider could ever come and listen to the message. Guest services, in which people are expected to recite the creed, confess their sins and sing Christian hymns do make evangelism difficult. We conduct our services as usual because we have a goal of conducting church services confused with our goal of having a time specially given to our guests. Frequently in this confusion we need to go back to our goals and establish the hierarchy of them more clearly. What to include and what to leave out of the agenda must be rigorously determined by the goals we have in mind. Often it is determined by the likes and dislikes of the person leading the meeting. Frequently it is determined by the traditions of the group.

It should be possible for you to answer the question "why are we doing this?" for each part of the agenda. Some parts of the agenda may be to put people at their ease or to prepare them for next week's meeting or to reinforce the basic goals of the groups but crucial parts of the agenda will

have to be explained in terms of meeting this night's goals and objectives. How the agenda is structured should have to do with the goals of tonight's meeting. The ongoing goals of the group should fit around the particular meeting's objectives.

### 3. Decide upon the Style and Mode

In running a meeting not only do we consider the goals and agenda but also the mode or style of the meeting. Usually the style of the meeting is established by institutional tradition. Frequently we do not even think about the style of any particular meeting. Lectures are like lectures and seminars like seminars, Sunday school classes are like Sunday school classes and church services like church services. However, conducting meetings in the way in which they have always been conducted is a poor excuse for thinking. With the goal in mind and the agenda of things that need to be covered, it is important to reflect upon the style of the meeting.

Generally speaking, more formal, constitutional, legal meetings enable competing interest groups to resolve their differences and achieve some working compromise. It becomes important to keep minutes and count votes accurately so that future misunderstandings will not arise. On the other hand, more dictatorial and authoritarian meetings achieve the fulfillment of tasks quicker and more efficiently. However, it requires a fairly unified agreement on the acceptance of the authority for the group to function effectively in this pattern. Disagreements in a dictatorial situation can only lead to fracturing the group, deep seated resentments or the overthrow of the dictator. Meetings which have a style of informality, freedom of expression, and open participation from all members can be more warm and welcoming to newcomers or to the establishment of a new group. Yet while this kind of pattern may maintain a large number of members it is unlikely to achieve any particular task.

We have then in the style of the meeting many considerations. The size of the group, the character of the institution, the basis of relationship and authority are all factors to weigh when considering how our goals will affect the mode of the meeting.

### 4. Choose the participants

We frequently choose whether to run a meeting by ourselves or to have lots of people doing different parts of the meeting on the basis of what suits us or what is normally done. There is no single right answer as to what should be done in any particular situation. We may choose to have other people participate in the leadership because it will make the meeting more relaxed, informal, and less authoritarian. We may choose to have them to participate in the leadership in order to be doing the ongoing work of training people in leadership. Or, we may choose not to have people participate in order to establish a norm of who is in charge, or to put people at ease by having confidence that all is under control or because of the incompetence of other people within the group, or because of the need of efficiency in this particular meeting. But whatever we are doing we should be able to explain to ourselves at least why we are doing it this way.

### Coaching Exercise

This is the kind of discussion paper that requires some active participation to gain benefit. So here are three programmes or meetings to plan:

- a) Leighton Ford is coming to preach the Gospel in your church's youth service this Sunday

night. You are asked to conduct the meeting. Draw up a programme.

- b) This is the first night of your home Bible study group. Plan out the meeting for tonight.
- c) Think back to a meeting you attended in the last week. Describe the agenda, analyse the purpose and goals, evaluate the style and mode.