

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

PURPOSE

This workshop is designed to help church leaders transform boards and committees from primarily administrative units into spiritual communities on mission; to serve as a catalyst in the transformation process of moving from life-draining meetings to life-giving ones.

TIME FRAME: 2 hours and 15 minutes (including a break)

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- I Introduction (*10 minutes*)
- II Worship and Prayer (*10 minutes*)
- III Sharing Personal Faith Stories (*20 minutes*)
- IV Reflecting on Biblical Stories (*20 minutes*)
- Break (*15 minutes*)
- V Discernment (*15 minutes*)
- VI Acts of Justice (*15 minutes*)
- VII Envisioning the Future (*20 minutes*)
- VIII Closing (*10 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Review the workshop.
- Prepare posters with the purpose statement and workshop outline.
- Make copies of the handouts.
- Prepare or ask a volunteer to prepare beverages/snack items for the break.
- Check to make sure it is okay to light a candle
- Gather materials:
 - Bibles
 - paper
 - pens or pencils
 - newsprint or marker board
 - markers
 - *unscented* candle and matches
 - hymnals or song books
 - copies of handouts

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

I Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and review the posted purpose and outline of the workshop. Mention that there will be a 15-minute break; however, they should feel free to take breaks as necessary. Offer the following introduction to the topic:

Boards and committees are an essential part of the contemporary service, yet serving on boards and committees is often experienced as boring, onerous, and stressful. This sad reality can be changed by intentionally transforming boards and committees into spiritual communities. For example, a finance committee, which is primarily an administrative unit projects income and expenses, manages money, and holds the church to a budget, can, as a transformed spiritual community, also be a compassionate ministry group that encourages generosity, invests financial resources responsibly, supports crucial ministries and trusts God for provisions.

Explain that in this workshop they will explore the following six activities that can help a working group become a spiritual community:

- Worship and prayer
- Sharing personal faith stories
- Reflecting on biblical stories
- Discernment
- Acts of justice
- Envisioning the future

II Worship and Prayer (10 minutes)

Light a candle, explaining that it represents God's presence. Invite the participants to spend a few moments in silence, opening themselves up to the presence of God's spirit in their midst.

Read Psalm 92:1–4 and ask the participants to suggest songs or hymns that can be used in board or committee meetings. List their suggestions. Examples

to get them started include: *Spirit of the Living God, Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart, Kum Ba Yah, and Called as Partners in Christ's Service.*

Mention that meetings are often opened and closed with a short prayer but such prayers can be seen as “book-end” prayers that don't recognize God as part of what comes between. Point out that elements of worship (singing, responsive reading, hearing Scripture, prayer) can be part of any meeting to remind members that all of life (including meetings) can honor God. Invite them to brainstorm ways that different types of prayer (praise, confession and petition) can be used at different places in the agenda. For example, offering prayers of thanksgiving after reports or beginning a meeting with sharing and petition so that members can affirm themselves as a mutually supportive community prior to focusing on tasks.

III Sharing Personal Faith Stories (20 minutes)

Explain that when we share our faith stories we share ourselves, yet we often substitute polite behavior and task focus for authentic faith sharing at meetings. Review the following benefits of story telling:

- Stories build community.
- Stories produce life and energy.
- Stories enable Christians to pray more intentionally.
- Stories build identity.
- Stories invite commitment.

Divide into groups of 3 or 4. Ask the participants to recall a board or committee meeting that was life-giving for them, when they felt energized, exhilarated, empowered, or uplifted instead of drained, exhausted, resigned, cynical, ignored, or misunderstood. Alternately, they can think of a time when they were moved in some profound way by a working group experience. Give each participant a minute or two to share about their experiences. *As always, give permission for those who choose not to share to feel free to pass.*

Have each group share some of the activities and aspects that helped make meetings and group work life-giving. List their responses and have them remain in their groups for part IV.

IV Reflecting on Biblical Stories (*20 minutes*)

Distribute Bibles and Handout A, “Decision-making in the Early Church,” and explain that Bible study is an important way to focus on God’s intentions in the life of a board or committee. Assign one or more of the following Scripture passages to each group:

Acts 1:12–26 Acts 6:1–6 Acts 11:1–18 Acts 15:1–21 Acts 15:36–41

Explain that you will be using an approach developed by Karen Marie Yust in *Attentive to God: Spirituality in the Church Committee*, which encourages the use of three types of questions:

- Clarifying questions to help identify the basic story or issue raised in the text.
- Experiential questions to help relate the text to our situation.
- Responsive questions that call forth actions that nurture faith and contribute to the coming of God’s realm.

Give them 10 minutes to complete the handout and then reconvene, asking the groups to share highlights of what they came up with.

Break (*15 minutes*)

Make sure participants know where the facilities and snacks are and give them a time for reconvening. Ask for two volunteers, one to read Colossians 3:12–17 and the other to read James 1:19–21, later on in the session.

V Discernment (*15 minutes*)

Remind the participants that the purpose of any church working group is to discern (determine and define) God’s intentions for church life. Introduce the following three practices of discernment:

- *Surrender*: In order to be focused on seeking God's intentions, a working group needs to undergo corporate and personal surrender, being willing to set aside former ways of doing things, personal preferences, and ego needs. Prayers of "letting go" or confession can be beneficial here.
- *Silence*: A time of *silent prayer and reflection* is an important part of decision-making. If, instead, debate is the approach, the decision-making will be dominated by those who can forcefully articulate and persuade others to their positions. A silent time for personal questioning, dreaming and imagining slows down the process and equalizes the power among the group members.
- *Consensus*: Using the process of *consensus* moves a decision-making group away from creating winners and losers. When the majority wins, up to 49% not only lose, but are also silenced. Consensus doesn't mean that everyone agrees but that everyone is able to accept the decision.

Invite participants to share experiences in working groups that have used any of these practices or that use debate. Encourage them to identify the strengths and weaknesses, the benefits and challenges of each.

VI Acts of Justice (15 minutes)

Explain that another way to discern God's perspective and intentions is to participate in God's activity and share the following quote:

It is in acting with God that we most fully experience God as active in the world. When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, listen to the discouraged, comfort the grieving, set free those imprisoned by the injustices of our society, and otherwise follow the example of Jesus, we learn about God's will by doing God's will. We . . . discover what it means to think and act with the mind of Christ. As we act with God, we are moved to envision new possibilities for future actions and different ways of being in the world. (Karen-Marie Yust, *Attentive to God*, p. 13)

Invite participants to share any experiences as part of a working group engaged in acts of justice.

Divide into groups representing different types of boards or committees and ask the groups to brainstorm together, identifying acts of justice that can be done by each kind of board and committee.

Distribute Handout B, “Our Light Will Shine,” explaining that it is one poetic statement of God’s intentions for believers. Invite them to join in the responsive reading with you. Afterwards, point out that this is another example of a way to integrate worship activities into meetings.

VII Envisioning the Future (20 minutes)

Point out that the beginning point of being a light to the world is to shine the light of God in the working group, which means that the way members of boards and committees treat one another is as important as completing tasks.

Ask your volunteers to read Colossians 3:12–17 and James 1:19–21.

Distribute Handout C, “Community-building Basics,” and invite participants to evaluate each step as it is currently being accomplished by their board or committee. After they have finished, lead a discussion on how to improve the board(s) or committee(s). If this workshop is composed of one board or committee and if the trust level among the participants is sufficiently high, invite them to share their rankings and decide on changes that can be suggested for future meeting of that board(s) or committee(s).

VIII Closing (10 minutes)

Thank the participants for their time, energy, and sharing. Affirm their continued commitment to the transformation of their working groups. Sing a song or hymn identified in activity II. Offer a prayer that is both a charge and a benediction, with statements of encouragement about the future and a blessing on their future work. Or close by reading of Philippians 4:8 as a prayer, inviting an “Amen”:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

RESOURCES

Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church, Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen (The Alban Institute, 1997).

Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders, Charles M Olsen (The Alban Institute, 1995).

Leading Small Groups: Basic Skills for Church and Community Organizations. Nathan W. Turner (Judson Press, 1996).

Attentive to God: Spirituality in the Church Committee, Karen-Marie Yust (Chalice Press, 2001).

HANDOUT A

DECISION-MAKING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Circle your assigned text(s):

Acts 1:12-26 Acts 6:1-6 Acts 11:1-18 Acts 15:1-21 Acts 15:36-41

Read your assigned text(s) and respond to the following questions:

Clarifying Questions

What issue is the early church addressing?

How is the issue dealt with?

How are decisions made?

Experiential Questions

When has the local congregation faced a similar situation?

Who do you turn to when you need help in making decisions?

What gets in the way of responding to what is perceived as God's intentions?

Responsive Questions

How do the models from the early church contribute to God's kingdom?

How might the example of the early church guide boards and committees?

HANDOUT B

Our Light Will Shine

Adapted from Isaiah 58:6–8a, 9b–10

Leader: Let me tell you what it really means to worship God: Loose the chains of injustice;

People: Free those who are oppressed!

Leader: Then your light will shine in the dark.

People: Then our light will shine in the dark.

Leader: Share your food with everyone who is hungry; your clothes with those who are cold.

People: Share your home with the homeless and the immigrant.

Leader: Then your light will shine like the dawning sun.

People: Our light will shine like the dawning sun.

Leader: Don't mistreat others or lie about them

People: Or accuse or blame.

Leader: Then your light will shine like the noonday sun.

People: Then our light will shine like the noonday sun.

HANDOUT C

COMMUNITY-BUILDING BASICS

1. *Deciding who serves*—People asked to serve are committed to ministry, are faithful, and understand what needs to be done.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

2. *Enlisting honestly*—People are given a clear written ministry description and the unwritten expectations of the board or committee assignment are clarified.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

3. *Setting the tone*—Time in meetings is given for members to share and pray for one another.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

4. *Holding an annual retreat*—Special time is set aside for sharing, fellowship, dreaming, and evaluation.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

5. *Making meetings productive*—Attention is given to planned and timed agendas, comfortable surroundings, energized openings, input by all participants, and timely conclusions.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

6. *“Spinning off” mission groups*—Short-term task forces are formed and monitored to work on specific projects that fall within the scope of the board or committee responsibility but are beyond the ability to tackle as a group.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

7. *Link up with other groups*—Network with other boards or committees on mutual short-term projects and/or form strategic alliances with community organizations that share common interests.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished

8. *Caring beyond the meeting*—Knowing one another and caring for one another outside of the board or committee meeting, praying for one another throughout the week.

Not accomplished 1 2 3 4 5 Accomplished