

Ways to Pray in a Board Meeting

by Charles M. Olsen

I often hear the term book-end prayers used to refer to the perfunctory way in which prayer can be scheduled and offered at the beginning and close of a church board meeting. It traditionally separates out the spiritual aspects of the meeting from the “business at hand.” The business part of the meeting still resembles the process that one would typically see outside the church—an emphasis on efficiency, a reliance on “reasoned” judgments, and a structure based on parliamentary rules, all ordered by a litany of reports with recommendations and decisions voted by majority rule.

If we redefine the activity of the people of God serving on church boards and see it as worshipful work, then prayer will no longer be relegated to a book-end position; instead, it will saturate the agenda and thread its way throughout the meeting.

Church boards that are “doing board differently” are discovering ways to allow prayer to permeate the whole meeting. Here are several ways:

Frame the Agenda with Prayer

Use opening and closing prayers that relate to the agenda of the meeting. The invocation might focus on the image of God and create an openness to and awareness of the Spirit’s presence and leading. The closing prayer might be a thankful offertory for the work of the meeting—lifted to God. Preparing for a night’s restful sleep invites prayers of release and relinquishment, and acknowledgment that boards cannot maintain control. Entrust the staff of a meeting to God in the same way you prepare for sleep—by letting go.

Glean for Prayer

From my boyhood days on the farm I remember that Gleaner was a brand name for a combine, a machine that separated the seed from the chaff and straw. At the beginning of a meeting, you might assign four people to keep notes with an eye toward separating out items for prayer. (They do not record the decisions being made. That is the task of the recording secretary.) One of the four should note anything that would be the basis for thanksgiving. Another would record needs or opportunities in the church or wider world that call for intercession. Still another would note situations within the board itself that would be the basis for prayers of petition. The fourth would note the work of the Spirit of God in the life of the council or congregation. At the end of the meeting, focus worship on the four areas of thanksgiving, intercession, petition, and praise.

Offer Prayers of Confession

One worship order I have seen includes the sentence “We admit how we are.” Confession covers not only errors and sins but also weariness, frustration, confusion, elation, boredom, fulfillment, and so forth. The prophets in the scriptural tradition were “seers,” those who had sight for things as they actually were. Naming “how things really are” and “what is left undone” are healthy processes for a board, but by themselves they

can bind and paralyze it; the board needs to have a safe place to work through these issues. If both the congregation and board have a corporate life, the board's confession can also be corporate. In an era of individualism in our culture and faith, understanding corporate spirituality is difficult. Perhaps confession is a good starting place.

Sing Prayers

Send each board member home with the congregational hymn book and the assignment to select one verse of any hymn that best captures the most appropriate prayer for the congregation at the present time. Pause to sing these hymns at appropriate moments throughout the meeting. The blending of many voices moves the council along the path of corporate spirituality. Often discussion and discourse are anything but harmonious. Singing together models the harmony to which they aspire. The presence of wonder and mystery in music also helps break up the framework of most meetings by adding some "grace notes."

"Time Out" for Prayer

After twenty minutes of debate and discussion over an issue on which people seem divided, the egos take over. Some deliberative groups have found value in taking three to five minutes of silent "time out" for personal refocusing and prayer. Let each one silently consider these questions: Am I closing myself off from information that we need to make this decision? Who do I need to forgive to be more fully present here? What is an image of God that needs to come to bear in this setting? How does the scripture that we read shed light on us now? Am I operating in a need-to-win or need-to-save-face mode? How would servant leaders make this decision? Time out periods could be called by a strict clock setting by the meeting moderator or by any member who requests it at any time for any reason.

Rotate Prayer

At the beginning of the meeting, assign each person to a certain fifteen-minute segment of the meeting; during that assigned time, members should pray silently for each person in the group and for the deliberative process in which the board is engaged.

Draw upon Model Prayers in Scripture

When educational consultant Donald Griggs was asked in a workshop how one might begin to use the Bible in committee meetings, he advised, "Don't introduce it as a new, complicated program. Just start doing it because that is what the people of God do. It won't be long until they can't remember doing it any other way!" The following samples are suggestive—certainly not exhaustive!

The Psalms can be used in many ways. For instance, have someone read a psalm slowly and deliberately, inviting any who would like to ponder a phrase to say "yes" out loud after that phrase has been read. The reader will stop for one to three minutes of silence, then continue reading until the next "yes."

The Lord's Prayer contains many phrases that rhythmically rise and fall. These phrases can be attached to the inhaling and exhaling of breath to create a common centering discipline.

Jesus's prayer for his friends and disciples (John 17) contains a cluster of specific petitions beginning with "that they may..." Let the board choose the petition that is most appropriate in the board's current situation.

Paul's heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving for his friends (Phil. 1:3–11) can be used in a special way when new board members are coming on or when others are exiting. Identify aspects of the "heart life" of which Paul speaks that the board can value for its own life. See where that applies to transitions within the board.

Claim Paul's great prayer for the church (Eph. 3:14–21) for your board. Find ways to report back how that prayer is being lived out during and between meetings.

In Matthew 18:19–20 Jesus invited his followers to agree on what to pray for. The most significant decision a board can make is about what its prayer will be. The prayer is not a strategic plan to be accomplished but a petition that cannot be accomplished by our own efforts.

Acknowledge Subliminal Prayer

Prayer may be ceaseless and subliminal, even when we engage in active work or deliberation. Such prayer plays just below the conscious level. The old desert saints wanted to pray without ceasing, so they attached the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner") to the rising and falling of their breath. For a while the breath carries the prayer. Then in a mystical moment the prayer carries the breath without one's thinking about it!

Meetings Are Worship

Resistance to infusing the work of a board with prayer tends to come from the conviction that "there is a place for everything and everything should be in its place"—that worship belongs to Sunday and sanctuary and prayer belongs to worship. But an inspirational moment in a meeting does wonders in loosening the strings of resistance, and those inspirational moments will come once worshipful work is attempted. Let the only rule be "meetings are worship." All else will flow to and from that fountain. Then we can drink from its fullness!

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