

From Peter Rogness

Thoughts about Congregational Annual Meetings

January 4, 2010

Dear Partners in Ministry,

In the happy and hopeful days that begin a new year, I'm sending a quirky letter about a not-so-quirky subject: congregational annual meetings. 'Tis the season, after all! This may turn out to be a letter that some of you quickly discard because you're not involved in running these or you may pass it off to someone who does. But in the spirit of the title I've used for e-letters—"The Way It Looks from Here"—I can report that I've both observed and heard reports of a huge variety of annual meeting experiences over the years. So, for what it's worth—and this year it may be worth more than other years—my thoughts!

A multiple choice quiz

Annual meetings are:

- A rich time to review ministry done, focus on ministry ahead, thank leaders of the past, and elect leaders for the future;
- A short but necessary stamp of approval for stuff that's going to happen anyway;
- The opportunity for release of every frustration and complaint that members have been storing up;
- The thing you do before you get to the potluck.

Your posture going into your annual meeting is most like:

- The emcee at the Oscars about to preside over an entire evening of awards and recognitions;
- An actor at the Oscars about to be recognized with a lifetime achievement award;
- The captain of the Titanic, blithely having a great time, unaware of any icebergs in the area;
- The captain of the big ship after the Titanic, peering in great anxiety into the darkness wondering if any killer icebergs are about to strike, like what just happened to that other ship;
- The dog cowering under the dining room table when the owner comes home, afraid of the morning accident being discovered;
- Sitting in the dentist chair, hoping the anesthesia gets you to the end of the appointment real quick.

I'm certain we have, in the 114 congregations of this synod, some of each of the answers represented!

Making decisions about our life together

We are a participatory church, one which organizationally lives out what we believe about the "priesthood of all believers." And we live in a democratic culture where people expect to be able to express their ideas and have a hand in shaping those things that affect them. So these annual events when we gather to make decisions about our life together should be significant. Annual meetings are not only the highest governing authority in the life of a congregation, but also the one appointed time each year when the whole of the ministry is reviewed, affirmed, and projected into the future.

We also live in anxious times, exacerbated by economic pressures that affect many congregations and by issues both local and denominational that might raise the temperature of annual meetings. So this is a good time to pass on some thoughts about how to make the most of these meetings, which at their best are the first options in the above quiz, but can often become one of the others!

Preparation

Preparation for annual meetings is essential. It's like the preparation for painting a room: filling the cracks and nail holes, priming the wall, sanding—painstaking, but necessary in that all provide a solid foundation for the paint. Same with the annual meeting. Consider some of the suggestions to help provide a foundation on which to conduct your congregation's business:

- Be aware of your congregation's history of annual meetings. What have they been like? No matter what you intend for this one, people will come expecting what they've come to expect. Build on what's been good; be aware of the challenge of changing past patterns.
- Do what's necessary to make sure that key leaders are on board with what needs to happen, so no one is surprised. Pastoral staff and other key staff, the council president, and other key lay leaders—all need to be informed about what needs to happen and what's needed from each of them.
- Attend to the building of an agenda. Simply calling for "any other new business" is an invitation to hastily presented and poorly understood issues. If people have concerns to be addressed, it's best to get them on the agenda, so leaders and members can think about how best to respond. In publishing notice of the meeting, consider inviting people who wish to submit a resolution to do so ahead of time so it can be considered, duplicated, and made available to all in attendance.
- Prepare and distribute the agenda ahead of time.
- Rules of procedure: Certain dos and don'ts are provided in your constitution and bylaws. Some congregations also adopt other particular rules for the meeting. Be sure people (especially meeting leaders) know what your rules are. If you're proposing rules of procedure for the meeting, they should be distributed ahead of time as well.
- Make sure people have all pertinent information *in advance* so they have time to read, understand, and make informed decisions. Handouts at the meeting itself are hardly worth the paper they're printed on if people haven't had a chance to read and prepare prior to the meeting.
- Establish time parameters. Let people know ahead of time how much time they're given for reports and how much time is allotted to given agenda items. (See below for extending time.)
- Leadership should be familiar with parliamentary procedure. Many annual meetings are informal and chatty, but whenever there is anxiety or difference of opinion, informality becomes demonic. The informality becomes frustrating to those seeking a particular action, it lends itself to criticism of the leader of not being fair, and it opens the door to chaos. Have a parliamentarian ready to guide the leader. (The parliamentarian is not the Supreme Court to whom things are appealed—she or he serves as an advisor to the chair.)

The meeting

Setting up the room

Make sure the room is set up with enough seating, good visibility for people and information that needs to be seen, and a sound system both for the podium/speaker. If you have more than 20-30 people, you'll also need a floor microphone or someone prepared to run around with a hand-held microphone.

Information and materials

If people haven't brought the materials they need, make sure additional copies are available.

Begin with scriptural reflection

Even though you may have been in church prior to the meeting, don't short-change the importance of beginning with some scriptural reflection on who we are called to be as God's people. It grounds everyone in the Spirit's presence and draws us together around the love of God in Christ that anchors us as well as the mission we're sent to be about. Reflect on the life of the early church, the people of God in challenging times. Have them share with one another how they've experienced God's touch, how they've been part of God's touch for others, how the community of faith has grounded them. There are lots of possibilities. Don't skip over them.

Review the work ahead

Take a minute at the beginning to explain how the meeting will work. This is especially important if you're doing something different or if there are any particular anxiety-producing decisions facing you.

Parliamentary procedure: What's it all about?

Explain that parliamentary procedure is intended to make the group's work fair and clear, not to control or impede. And then, as you move through the meeting, every time there's a motion, explain what the effect of the motion will be: a yes vote will do this; a no vote will do this. If a motion is out of order, don't be afraid to rule it so, but explain why it is, not simply that the chair doesn't like it!

Use the agenda

Use your agenda as an ally; keep people informed as you move through it, how much time you've got, etc. If people need or want more time on a particular issue, make clear what that means for ending time or time for other matters. You can call for a motion to extend the time of the meeting, which lets the whole body decide.

Suggestions about handling controversy

Should you encounter a highly-charged matter, some reminders/ground rules to set before people might include:

- Let's discuss this in a way that builds us up as a body, respects the views of everyone, and makes it a safe discussion for anyone to enter.
- To that end, ask that people refrain from applause in response to speakers.
- Consider a two-minute time limit on people speaking to a motion. (Identify a timekeeper in advance and explain how time will be kept.)
- No speaking a second time on a matter until everyone who wants to speak has had an opportunity.
- Alternate those speaking for and against a motion.

- No personal attacks. Rule them out of order and remind people of being respectful.
- Stick close to parliamentary procedure.

Unanticipated motions

Should you encounter someone who makes a motion from the floor that would have a major effect on the life of your congregation, proceed cautiously and inform those present of the need for fully understanding the effect such an action would have. It's always in order to suggest a major decision, for which there's been little preparation, be referred to a group—council, executive committee, staff, or others—for analysis and recommendation for later consideration. Some factors to be aware of:

- Be clear how the issue may relate to your governing documents—constitution and bylaws and personnel policies, especially. Any motion that is in violation of such governance documents should properly be ruled out of order, with explanation given to the process for properly bringing the matter forward (i.e., amending governing documents).
- When someone seeks to add an expense to a budget, they should be asked to propose a source of income (additional or corresponding cut somewhere else) to cover it. The synod assembly has such a provision in its rules, which would also be a good thing to consider for your own meeting.
- If someone seeks to cut staff positions, be clear what your governing documents and personnel policies say about such matters. Clergy under call cannot have those calls terminated simply by a congregational vote without other steps required by the constitution happening earlier.

Motions in response to Churchwide Assembly actions

This year there could be someone who moves to redirect or withhold mission support or moves to leave the ELCA or join another church body. Here again there are constitutional provisions that speak to these steps, and in any event they should have study and discussion prior to becoming the subject of a motion brought from the floor for a vote. Specifically:

- A motion to terminate the relationship with the ELCA must be at a specially called congregational meeting (thus not at the regular annual meeting). See C9.62.a in your congregational constitution: *“A resolution indicating desire to terminate its relationship must be adopted at a legally called and conducted special meeting of the congregation...”*
- A motion to withhold or redirect mission support is in conflict with the constitution for congregations (C6.03.b, C12.05.d and e, which make clear the expectation of financial support of the synodical and churchwide expressions of the church).

Concluding the meeting

- It's important to conclude the annual meeting properly. A few guidelines:
- Summarize any actions that have now been taken. In particular, if something was set in motion to be considered later, speak to what will happen next and how people will be kept informed.
- Remind people that for all the attention to tending to this organization as responsibly as we can, this is the Lord's church, we gather as God's people drawn together by the Spirit, which breathes life into what we do! And remind them that they have not just done the business of a private religious club, but have done the tune-up work for the presence in the world God has called to be.

- Thank people for their time. Thank people who did preparation and extra work. Thank, thank, and thank some more.

Finally, a few post-meeting comments

Do the follow-up housekeeping from the annual meeting; it's as important as the preparation!

- Inform people of election results (both those elected and those not); inform anyone affected by budget decisions of those decisions; and make sure minutes of the meeting are put in good order soon, because memories fade and an accurate record is essential.
- If someone came out of the meeting bruised or hurt, seek the wholeness of the body and tend to those hurts.
- Let those of us who are your partners in the synod office know of how things have gone. Call us or send an email, particularly if there are things we should be aware of or matters where we can be of some help going forward.

A word of thanks

Finally, a word of thanks from me. I hope your annual meetings are occasions for lifting before those assembled the many ways you are faithfully proclaiming, hearing, and living out God's love for us and for this world. You do it in many ways in your congregation, ways so natural you take them for granted, but for which I'm very grateful. And through the life together in which you are partners, we are channels of the love and grace of God to the world... and I thank you for that as well.

May your time together in these gatherings be rich and blessed.

Peter Rogness