

Observing and Interpreting a Meeting

Observation:

How is the room set up? Who is sitting where? (Draw a rough diagram of the set up, noting where the chair/moderator, members, participants, visitors, etc. are sitting and the location of any kinds of presentation materials (white board, projector, newsprint).)

Event: Monthly Church Council Meeting

Place: United Church of Christ at Valley Forge, Wayne, PA. Our church is in suburban Philadelphia. Quiet, residential area.

Date: December 15, 2016

We are in a small conference room. When you walk in the door, there are two white tables put together to be one large table with a dozen matching chairs. There is a window seat and window in front of you as you walk in. There is a TV on a stand in the right hand corner.

The President of Council (female) and the secretary (female) tend to sit on the far end as you walk in. Everyone else just sits where they want. We have, in addition to our President and Secretary, our VP (male), and our Chairs for Worship (female), Stewardship (female), Membership (female), Christian Ed (female), Finance (male), Treasurer (male), and Property (male) and a male guest, in addition to myself, the Moderator of the Elders. Our Pastor (male) was ill and could not come to the meeting. We are all white, and with the exception of our secretary, who is probably in her early 30's at most, are over the age of 45. The oldest is in her early 80's. I will address each person according to their roles.

We were given an agenda, Pastor reflection and committee reports, which was also sent electronically on a previous date. During the meeting, the Treasurer gave us a handout with a chart regarding the church's cash balance.

What is going on before the meeting? (Who is talking to whom? What is the mood? What kinds of interactions occur? Is there a written agenda? Did members have materials beforehand or did they receive them as they arrived? Are there refreshments? What are they? Who takes them?)

People are filing in slowly. The meeting is supposed to start at 7:00 PM. At 6:55, five out of 12 expected have arrived. Treasurer and President are talking business. People are talking in a normal tone - not unhappy, but not especially jovial. Seven out of 12 arrived by 7:02. We were talking about personal stories, for instance, Christian Ed hit a deer with her car on the way to the meeting. She was all right, but a little shaken up. Her car suffered some damage and she wasn't sure how she would get around to fixing it. I also explained this assignment and talked about different types of leadership - I told my friends how my husband's boss is coercive for instance.

Sadly, there were no refreshments.

We all received a written agenda and reports.

How does the meeting begin? (Who calls the meeting to order? How does it get started? What are the initial comments or items of business? Note both the official start to the meeting and any other comments and how this shapes the course of the meeting and the mood of the room.)

President calls meeting to order at 7:04 PM. She asked if we had any Joys or Concerns to start. Membership and Christian Ed. brought up the attack of the Russian ambassador who was assassinated on television. A couple of others noted that their children returned home from college for the Christmas break.

We noted corrections in the minutes and passed them as amended.

President then gives the Pastor's Reflection. Someone read Luke 2:1-20 aloud and then we discussed our earliest memories of that Mary and Joseph story. The directions on the paper said to split up and talk in pairs, but Membership balked, and a couple of

others concurred, so we talked as a group instead. (I dare to say that if Pastor had been present, we would have talked in pairs.) We discussed our earliest memories of this story, how the barn was cozy and it was cold out and what a long journey Mary and Joseph took.

Then we talked about which parts of the scripture seemed political in nature - for instance, 2:1 and 2 mention Emperor Augustus and Quirinius. Then we talked about which parts of the story mention God's power, for instance, 2:9 "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Then we talked about the following question - What does the context of this story tell us about what it might mean that this baby is the "Savior?" I wrote down, "That God turns our ideas upside down. Babies aren't supposed to be powerful. Jesus is poor and vulnerable."

As I looked around, I saw lots of interested faces and small smiles. All were engaging eye contact.

What happens during the meeting? (Note two or three significant events or decisions that were made. Describe the process by which those decisions occurred.)

At this point in the meeting, we start discussing our reports. Our general rule of thumb is to not read your report to everybody. We can all read. We do add information that isn't on the report, updates. We skipped the Pastor's report, due to his illness. My report would have been next, but Elders did not meet in November so I just gave a verbal report about how I have been asking my Elders to keep in touch with the members of their "flocks" (the congregation split into five groups, or flocks). President asked if they would give feedback on their progress, and I told her that I was planning to discuss that with them.

Then Treasurer gave his report, along with a handout. All were still engaged, but looking more serious. Personally, my eyes tend to glaze over during these reports.

Then Finance gave his report. He's new and tends to read his report, which is quite detailed. His voice is a bit monotone. Looking around, Membership is deep in thought, everyone else is engaged. People start looking at their papers as Treasurer is speaking.

After that, we discussed our Congregational Meeting, coming up on January 22. Membership has planned the Souper Bowl of Caring luncheon, with a food drive for our local food pantry. Discussion also centered around how to gather more people for

the October meeting. We find it hard to get a quorum. Membership suggested a Halloween party or other event to make people want to stay. We also discussed changing the date of the meeting to November, but this would require a change in the constitution. We decided to hold off on making a decision until January. This was an easy discussion, with plenty of joking and giggling going on.

As the meeting went on, I noticed more and more tired faces. People putting their hands in their faces as they paid attention. Property was looking on his phone at one point.

By the time we got to the final report, people were getting restless. I started wondering why the guest was here. He hadn't spoken the whole meeting. (Turns out, he had a meeting scheduled with President, for after and she invited him to the meeting. Postscript - guest was a possible new President candidate. This was not explained to us.)

By 8:50, Christian Ed was getting impatient and said, "Let's wrap it up. Let's wrap it up."

Analysis:

What are your impressions of the meeting (Was it orderly? Was it worthwhile? Was there energy in the room? Where the people engaged in the meeting?)

The meeting was very orderly and well-run. There was energy in the room, but it depleted as the evening wore on. It is worthwhile, since it's important to discuss the business of running the church, but there are parts where you can zone out.

What process was used to make decisions? What there more than one?

We just discussed things, except for the minutes. We use Robert's Rules for that.

What are the outcomes?

Most committee chairs discuss their reports and what is expected for the future.

How did people treat one another?

People were very friendly and cordial. No shouting or arguing. The closest we got was annoyed Christian Ed over the lateness of the hour.

Was there conflict? How was it handled?

No, there really wasn't any conflict.

What was the role of moderator/chair? (How did she/he function in the meeting?)

President leads the meeting, tries to keep things moving along, letting people know when it's their turn to give their report. She makes sure things are moving smoothly and according to protocol. She takes excessive notes in spite of our secretary typing away on her laptop. President is very cool and calm and remains so throughout the meeting.

Synopsis:

Write a one page synopsis of the key dynamics of this meeting – both the overt decisions/processes and the underlying organizational issues that you observe. How well did the person leading do? What suggestions would you make? If you were the overall leader of this organization, what steps would you take after this meeting?

One of the goals in our Council meeting, in addition to conducting the business of the church, is to keep things moving. We like to get our business done in a timely fashion. President started the meeting only 5 minutes late. Pretty good.

Our process is always the same - Joys and Concerns, Opening Prayer, Reflection, Reports, Ongoing Business and Calendar Review. Certain times of the year are more intense than others. For instance, October is Statement of Need time. Each Chair needs to let Finance know what their budget amount would be for their committee, which would be put into the Statement of Need, (sort of a budget "wish list") to be presented to the congregation to be voted on at the end of October. We had a discussion about this because the timing of the October meeting is crucial, since we have our pledge drive right after. The first day for pledges to be brought in is always the Sunday before Thanksgiving, so we need so many weeks to do the Pledge Drive. There is concern, though, about an October congregational meeting, because many of our church members volunteer at a farm owned by one of our families, and October is their big pumpkin season. The debate concerned whether or not it really mattered if we missed those folks who worked at the farm (not really - there weren't that many), would the beginning of November make a difference (we decided it wouldn't) and should we change the constitution to reflect more flexibility in choosing a date? (We decided to wait until January to make a decision because we wanted Pastor's input.)

President did an excellent job - she's very calm and on top of things. If something does slip by her, and someone brings it up, she accepts it with thanks and usually a little laughter. She is exceedingly kind, but at the same time, she isn't afraid to speak her truth, even if it isn't popular. I have disagreed with her on a couple of things since I've known her (not in a meeting), but we never let it get out of hand. There is always plenty of grace and forgiveness.

If I were leading this meeting, I would want to be as calm as President was. I would probably have emailed Pastor afterwards to let him know what happened at the meeting and to answer any questions he had. I would want his advice on the changing of the October meeting date.