

Churches plan annual meetings to reflect on events of the past year, to plan financially and programmatically for the year ahead, to elect leaders and to celebrate life together in community.

History and Background

The early church community made decisions about how to carry out its mission. In the 16th century, when it seemed that decision-making power had gone from the congregation, leaders called for a reformation. Meetings for church members to make decisions that affect their common life grow out of the Reformation idea of the “priesthood of all believers.” In colonial America, “consent of the governed” became an important aspect of both church life and community life. Out of the Reformation understanding that Christ is the head of the church and the United Church of Christ understanding of the autonomy of local churches, we have meetings for members to determine how to follow faithfully where the Spirit leads. The meetings usually satisfy a legal requirement of incorporation, as well.

Common Practices

Some churches see the annual meeting as a business meeting only. They fit it into a Sunday morning worship service or ask people to

remain after the service to conduct the official business for the year. They read minutes, make reports, vote on the budget, elect new officers, transact any necessary official business and go home. Some churches use the annual meeting as a time to celebrate the church’s life. Some meet for a special meal in a restaurant or a pot-luck meal at the church. They too, carry on the official business. Sometimes reports are a videotape, a question-and-answer period or a skit. In addition, the annual meeting becomes a way to honor the people who have been leaders during the past year, to inform members about the denomination or particular projects in which the church participates or to set goals for the next year. They have an opportunity to learn about mission or a special emphasis from guests.

At least one church separates its annual meetings into three basic segments: “Stating Our Purpose Together as a Congregation,” which includes a call to worship and unison reading of the purpose from the church’s constitution; “Celebrating the Life We Have Had Together in the Past Year,” which includes reports, celebration of special achievements and hymns of thanksgiving; and “Looking Ahead into the New Year and Asking God’s Blessing upon Us,” in which members approve the budget, determine special offerings and sing hymns asking for the Spirit’s direction.

Responsibilities

Most churches do not have a committee set aside to plan the annual meeting. It becomes the responsibility of the governing board or the pastor and presiding officers. When you are given the responsibility of planning the annual meeting, you will want to begin planning several months in advance. Your responsibilities may include:

- Setting the time and place for the meeting in keeping with bylaw requirements.
- Assuring that official notice and other forms of notice and invitation take place.
- Determining the purposes of the annual meeting.
- Considering various ways the purposes could be achieved and making recommendations.
- Meeting with the governing board to report recommendations for the annual meeting and to adopt an agenda for the meeting.
- Recruiting people to prepare and serve a meal or refreshments.
- Giving officers and committed chairpersons an outline for written reports and the deadline for receiving them. You may want a short written report for the church’s records and a visual or oral report for the annual meeting. Be sure to tell the report writers exactly what’s wanted. It helps to have the reports distributed before the annual meeting so that members can be prepared to ask questions or

act on recommendations. Reports can be photographs or a videotape. Each committee could have a booth where members answer questions and display charts or photos. No one comes to hear a written report read aloud.

- Photocopying and distributing written annual reports.
- Alerting the nominating committee to deadlines.
- Securing speakers, visual aids or other resources for the meeting.
- Publicizing the meeting and encouraging attendance. You may want posters, announcements in newsletters, mission moments or a bulletin board display that alerts all members to the meeting. Announce the meeting early and make a major communications effort two or three weeks before the meeting. This lets members know the purpose of the meeting and why it’s important that they come. It can also help to set the mood for the meeting.
- Making assignments for segments of the meeting. This may mean contacting someone from the conference or the community as a guest speaker.
- Arranging tables and chairs, securing audiovisuals and needed equipment; being responsible for physical arrangements for the meeting.
- Presiding at the annual meeting. Be able to state the rules simply and clearly: who is eligible to vote, what constitutes a quorum and what the rules are for debate.

- Evaluating the annual meeting.
- Making a report for the next committee who plans the annual meeting.

You may review a particular area of interest or use the time to further develop and articulate your mission. Use it as one more occasion to review your mission statement.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Ability to work with other people.
- Ability to pay attention to details.
- Understanding of parliamentary procedure.
- Knowledge of the constitution and bylaw requirements for the annual meeting.
- An understanding of how meetings of this size work.
- Knowledge of the people in your church.
- Understanding that the true business of the church is ministry and that many activities can aid in that ministry.

Issues Facing the Church

- In many churches the annual meeting is the only time the members gather for decision-making. Much of the focus is on the past. How can you not overlook the past but focus on looking to the future as an aid to planning?
- How does the church distinguish what it wants to do from what Christ's mission is for it? How can a large group work on practices of discernment?

Questions

- What was the purpose of your church's last annual meeting?
- Are there other purposes that you need to consider for your annual meeting?
- Are there any new ideas about annual meetings that you would like to incorporate into planning for your annual meeting? If so, what do you need to do?

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Talk with people in the church to find out what they are thinking and feeling before making plans
- Pray and worship.
- Ask your pastor or conference staff for information on the latest audio-visuals about the United Church of Christ and its mission.
- Use the annual meeting as a time to focus on your church's mission.