PREPARING FOR AWKWARD MOMENTS

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Key aim: nurturing a safe environment through thorough preparation and healthy control of the meeting.

Key risk: erroneously assuming that a meeting involving Christians will, by default, reflect Christian values. In the main it will, but at times this will only happen if it's led well.

Expanding slightly on the terms used above:

- 'Healthy' control equals being realistic and clear what has to be achieved; firm intervention when required; actively nurturing and seeking rich discussion from all, not just a few; keeping to time; when required giving a clear lead; not allowing dogmatic personal agendas to prevail.
- 'Unhealthy' control equals using a meeting as a rubberstamp of one's personal agenda; unreasonably stifling debate (for example, each person can only speak once – in certain specific circumstances there may be a case for this, but such procedures need to be used with care); consistent manipulation of the agenda to avoid important but difficult issues; suppressing any dissenting views; allowing a meeting to agree one thing and then pursuing one's own agenda anyway (including distortion of the minutes so they fail to reflect accurately what was agreed).
- The hallmarks of a 'safe' culture are the emergence of genuine kingdom values of mutual love and respect (i.e. practical behaviours will strongly reflect previously agreed protocols); rich and inclusive discussion, even over contentious issues, and a sense that the authentic voice and mind of Christ is able to emerge.

AWKWARD MOMENT	POSSIBLE RESPONSES	KEY RISKS
Someone with a strong personal agenda dominating discussion.	On important issues use a procedure such as breaking into small groups to discuss, and then seek feedback from each group. Politely but firmly invite other responses. If people are hesitant to speak then the leader can offer an alternative perspective to initiate debate, for example 'Robert, I realise you feel... but an alternative view may be...' Have the courage to overtly refute or challenge a comment which is demeaning or which patently contravenes something already clearly agreed. There may well, short-term, be an 'awkward silence' but longer term the meeting will be safer for such interventions. Remind people about ground rules or code of conduct. If really serious – deal with the issue outside the meeting through private discussion with the individual(s).	Making things personal. Suppressing or badly handling serious dissent (particularly which reflects the views of a significant minority), which may be misplaced or wrongheaded, but which is nevertheless sincerely held. Better to address the underlying issues even if this takes time and the pace has to be adjusted.

AWKWARD MOMENT	POSSIBLE RESPONSES	KEY RISKS
Long winded, garrulous debate.	Gently but firmly intervene and summarise to make the point that the view has been heard and understood. Keep reminding the meeting about time and progress through the agenda.	
Going off topic.	Be clear in one's own mind about the issue under discussion – and what are legitimate and illegitimate rabbit holes. Intervene to steer things back on track, and if necessary agree to pick up the 'rabbit hole' topic as a separate discussion at another time.	The debate and issues associated with a certain topic may in fact be legitimately much wider than initially envisaged. If necessary, give more time for discussion, or postpone a decision.
Someone introduces or raises an 'elephant in the room' issue but at the wrong time or wrong place.	Firm intervention is required, but be completely transparent and overt, for example: 'We all recognise that this is a key issue, Winston, which we need to give time and space to, but if we open it up now we risk getting side-tracked...'	
Allowing off-line cliques to emerge, which can happen if, for instance, PCC members exchange expansive emails before and after a meeting about key agenda issues.	Keep debate within the meeting and, once a decision is made, agree a collective 'cabinet style' ownership of the decision.	Not to be confused with stopping PCC members legitimately seeking the views of church members.
An inappropriate and/or derogatory comment about another person.	Depending on the severity and frequency, there are various responses: for example, 'rebuke' publicly... or remind the meeting of ground-rules or code of conduct... or gently suggest a rephrasing to focus on the issue rather than the person.	Being too heavy handed or ignoring the behaviour.
It becomes clear that the agenda cannot be covered in the time available.	Keep summarising progress through the agenda to encourage the meeting as a whole to bear some responsibility for keeping to time through concise discussion. Don't try to rush. It is much better to reprioritise and agree with the meeting to defer an agenda item.	