

## Rituals

By Wanda Heise, MHS Board Member

What does the word “ritual” conjure up for you?  
How about “board ritual”?

Growing up in an Anabaptist home, I was taught that certain rituals and images were not something that we should be a part of. Rituals, as others have used them, were pretty much left out of our religious experience. My Catholic friends have since introduced me to some very meaningful parts of their spiritual experience that can be comforting and meaningful at times in ways that my own experience never was. I appreciate learning from others’ experiences and traditions.

Over the years, I have learned that there are rituals in many places - even in board rooms. And I’ve learned that in different cultural board settings different rituals are important. For example, at our church we are becoming more cross cultural as a congregation and are encouraging our board to express that diversity. We learned from our African American sister that having food at each meeting was a way of telling members that they are valued and important. This was especially helpful to those who were rushing to church board right after work. It was also important to greet each member as they arrived, whether or not the meeting had already started. From my background a late arrival meant that I should tiptoe in and try not to distract anyone. To my sister, to not be greeted was an affront to her individuality and value to our meeting. Until we discussed some of these customs and rituals, we all seemed to take ours for granted. We didn’t realize their power to silence each other.

As I reflected on types of rituals that might be used in the boardroom, the main one that I have experienced is the devotional or centering prayer. Most frequently these are practiced at the beginning of a session or time of meeting. We have come to expect these times. But I’ve also found that when I join a new board, I don’t always know what is expected of me when asked to “do devotions”. Each board has a culture about this ritual. Do we read scripture and share thoughts? Do we share our spiritual journey? Does it include an opening prayer? Then to make rituals more difficult to comprehend, are there limits to what should/can be included? Could I bring a favorite poem, work of art, or piece of music to use to meditate?

There have been other rituals that have been meaningful as well. In one board, we were invited to send cards to a member who was ill or after a member lost a spouse. Another board collects money for a gift for the CEO every Christmas.

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# Rituals (cont'd)

The importance of rituals is what has intrigued me the most, as I think about this subject. The same ritual might be meaningful in different ways to different individuals, just as there are differences in cultural understandings. It is important that we have the opportunity to share meaning. In the best of times, rituals bring our entire physical body into focus in a special way that might not happen without intentionality. If we engage our emotions, our spirit and our intellect, I believe that the Holy Spirit can work through us both as individuals and as a board more completely. Rituals provide continuity like habits such as brushing our teeth. Yes, they can become boring or mundane. But if we allow ourselves to use them to focus, we'll do a better job in each of our roles—even brushing teeth.

I have always appreciated having board members share from their faith journey, from what they are passionate about and from words or music that is meaningful to them. Each of these has helped me to know them better and appreciate what God has created in them.

May we learn to love rituals and find their rightful place in our board experiences.

## For Discussion

1. What rituals does your board have? Are they done consciously? Or are they habits you don't think about?
2. Are there rituals that other board's use that are meaningful?
3. Is there something you would like to stop or start doing together?



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## Sample Board Rituals

Here are some activities that you might not think of as rituals:

- Giving plaques for years of service
- Reading poetry and doing a tapestry during a new member's orientation
- Using candles or other illustrations during devotional or other times of meditation
- Using a book such as [Setting the Agenda: Meditations for the Organization's Soul](#) for devotional thoughts to share what has been helpful to other boards
- Eating together as a board before the meeting
- Planning a regular staff/board dinner

[Setting the Agenda: Meditations for the Organization's Soul](#) by Edgar Stoesz and Rick Stiffney

