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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How Does Church Size Impact Decision-Making?

Faith Church, organized in 1923, had its first building destroyed by fire in early 1948. The congregation responded by purchasing and razing two adjacent houses to enlarge the site, and moved into the current building in late 1948.

In recent years, many leaders at Faith Church have felt it is time to make new plans for the future. Consequently, the governing board appointed a seven-member Futures Committee. After nine meetings, held over a period of five months, the Futures Committee submitted a report that can be summarized in three sentences: 1. Our membership is growing older in age and fewer in numbers; the big *increase* since 1988 has been in the number of elderly widows, while the big *decrease* has been in married couples with young children at home. 2. The time for action is now! 3. To reach, attract, and serve younger generations will require major changes in our ministry plan and our priorities. (That means we must choose between change and continuing to watch our numbers go down.)

The Futures Committee scheduled a series of congregational meetings to discuss this report.

Among the numerous responses, four different courses of action received considerable support. 1. Appoint a seven-person task force to study the ministries of nearby congregations that contain large numbers of people born after 1960. (That could provide ideas on how Faith Church can compete effectively in the effort to reach younger generations.) 2. Expand the paid staff by adding a young associate pastor who focuses on reaching younger generations. (Our senior pastor, who arrived in 1990, was born back in 1946.) 3. Relocate the meeting place five miles to the west—where the new residential subdivisions are attracting people born after 1970. 4. Change the first of our two Sunday morning worship services to a 9:00 a.m. contemporary service. (Few young adults with children attend any type of service that begins earlier than 9:00 a.m.)

The immediate response of Faith Church's members was to choose up sides. Each of the four suggestions earned committed supporters and equally committed opponents.

The central issue is, "How do we make decisions here?" Congregations that have been gathering for the corporate worship of God in the same room for more than three

or four decades usually are heavily influenced by local traditions—"How we've always done it here." The big exception to that generalization is congregations with widespread agreement that "We're faced with a crisis!" That can reduce the change-resistance. That fire at Faith Church, back in 1948, is an example of how a crisis opened the door to several radical changes.

Therefore the first priority is to determine whether most of the people agree with the seven members of the Futures Committee that "The time for action is now!" In many churches, after much discussion, the immediate or eventual answer to that question is no. Those seven leaders of the Futures Committee had spent many hours over five months studying the issues before reaching agreement that a crisis exists. Therefore a reasonable goal would be to give the congregation's members at least three months to discuss the Futures Committee Report and to talk themselves into the need for major change. If the average atten-



dance at weekend worship is under 125, this decision may require four-to-twelve months. Those differences in the amount of time required for decision-making introduce a widely neglected facet of governance in congregational life.

How does size, as measured by average weekly worship attendance, influence decision-making?

—One-half of all congregations in American Protestantism average 75 or fewer at worship. In most of them the decision-making process resembles a participatory democracy. That means the unwritten, decision-making goal is to achieve a consensus, not simply a 51 percent or 67 percent majority. Achieving that requires much more time!

—Another one-third of congregations in American Protestantism report an average worship attendance of between 76 and 200 at worship. Most of these congregations follow a representative system of governance. The big exception to this procedural habit is the relatively new congregation averaging 350 or more at worship in which the energetic and visionary founding pastor has seniority over every other member. That pastor's leadership style often resembles a tribal chief.

—Among the 17 percent of American Protestant churches that average more than 200 at worship, (a) many of them place most of the authority for decision-making in a group of two to three dozen adults, including both volunteers and paid staff and (b) many are staff-led.

—About 5 or 6 percent of all American Protestant congregations are large or mega. These congregations resemble a nation. They make crucial decisions either by a leadership team of three-to-ten paid staff or by the senior minister.

Summary: At the small-church end of this spectrum the relationship among the members determines how decisions are made. At the large-church end of the spectrum a tiny number of people make the crucial decisions.

Family, Clan, Tribe, or Nation? The decision-making spectrum outlined above introduces an analogy described repeatedly in the Old Testament. *How do human beings divide themselves into groups?* The history of human beings on this planet divides human associations into five groups.

—The smallest decision-making group is the *family*.

—The next smallest decision-making group is the *clan* composed of several related families. The clan—which recognizes and affirms the identity of every individual—usually includes 12 to 40 adults. That helps to explain why when congregations in American Protestantism report their average worship attendance, the most frequently reported numbers are 12, 18, 20, 25, 30, 35, and 40. The “natural” size of a Protestant congregation is 25 to 35 worshipers.

—A third size decision-making group is the *tribe* consisting of several clans. For most of the world's history, human settlements consisted of approximately 150 persons, give or take 75 people.

—The fourth size decision-making group is the *nation*, which includes a variety of tribes or states or provinces.

—The fifth size decision-making group is a *cluster of nations* that resembles the British Empire during the first third of the twentieth century—linked together for greater economic and management advantage.

In American Protestantism most congregations fit into one of five decision-making types:

—The smallest includes those congregations consisting of two or three or four *family trees*.

—The most numerous of the congregational groups consists of several families that resemble a *clan* and average fewer than 40 to 50 at worship.

—A third type resembles a *tribe* and averages fewer than 135 at worship.

—The fourth type of congregation includes hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people and resembles a *nation* consisting of dozens of cells, choirs, circles, classes, fellowships, groups, and task forces, each resembling a family or a clan or a tribe.

—The fifth type of congregation includes that small but growing number of multisite megachurches that resemble a *cluster of nations*—several countries linked together for greater economic and mission effectiveness. Most of these separate-from-the-main-campus groups resemble a *nation*. Some of these satellite congregations may resemble a *family* or a *clan* or a *tribe*. But people at each separate campus (a) display a high level of loyalty to that large and complex megachurch filled with anonymity and (b) appreciate the fact that life at their site is marked by a lower level of complexity and a lower degree of anonymity.

Before initiating change in any congregation, ask two questions:

First, are we recommending change by addition or by subtraction (adding an element to our tradition or behavior, or killing an element of our tradition or behavior)? Change by addition usually requires a greater emphasis on reinforcing and perhaps even expanding the points of continuity (past tradition and behavior).

Second, given the size and culture of this congregation, what is the appropriate conceptual framework for deciding how to make decisions in this congregation today? Are we a family, a clan, a tribe, a nation, or a cluster?

Paradoxically, the closer to the family end of the spectrum, the more time is required to make decisions that achieve increased quality and quantity of mission and ministry effectiveness.