

## **How to Minister Effectively in Family, Pastoral, Program, and Corporate Sized Churches**

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Clergy may be set up for failure when they move from effective work in one size congregation and begin a new pastorate in a different-sized congregation. If, for example, a pastor is thriving in a Pastoral-sized congregation (50 to 150 active members) and then receives a call to a Program-sized congregation (150 to 350 active members), that pastor will have to make a significant shift in style of ministry to be effective in this new congregation, too. Few middle judicatories pay attention to this transition in context of ministry; thus they fail to prepare their clergy adequately for a new style of pastoral leadership.

I would say it takes an unusually gifted pastor to shepherd a congregation from its birth to a large corporate size. Few clergy have the flexibility required to accomplish all those necessary shifts in style. More is required than simply changing ones behavior. Since not only clergy but members too get stuck at each stage of growth, every time there is a shift in size clergy need to convince the congregation's leaders that a change in their behavior is warranted. Pastors of missions often take a congregation up to a certain size only to reach a plateau at that level. The failure to grow is rarely a conscious choice. Usually there are demographic factors that can be blamed. But at an unconscious level the pastor has concluded that this is about as many people as s/he can handle. The congregation, also at an unconscious level, has colluded with that decision.

The theory of congregational size that I find most workable is Arlin Rothauge's, described in his booklet *Sizing Up a Congregation For New Member Ministry*.<sup>1</sup> It was originally written to help congregations recognize the different ways different-sized churches assimilate new members. When a theory is on target, however, it so accurately reflects reality that it can be applied to other dimensions of a church's life and work. Rothauge's theory elicits consistent "ache's" from clergy who are reflecting on their transition from one size parish to another. Whether churches are growing or downsizing, congregations hold on to deeply engrained assumptions about what constitutes a dynamic church and what effective clergy do. The inflexibility of these expectations is an important cause of clergy malfunctioning.

Rothauge sets forth four basic congregational sizes. Each size requires a specific cluster of behaviors from its clergy. The average number of people attending weekly worship and the amount of money being contributed regularly provide the most accurate gauge of church size. Since membership rolls fluctuate wildly

depending upon how frequently they are evaluated, they cannot provide an accurate measurement of congregational size. Rothauge also holds that a church's size category is a matter of attitude as much as numbers. I know one congregation that averages 700 at Sunday worship and still functions on a Pastoral model. All the pastor did was preach on Sunday and visit people through the week. The pastor's perception of his job burned him out and eventually cost him his marriage and his ministry.

Here is a brief description of each of Rothauge's four sizes and my understanding of what members expect of clergy in each size. As clergy move into new congregations they will profit from watching how a congregation's expectations of its clergy, growing out of the church's size and consequent dynamics, begin to be projected their way.

### **The Family Church (fewer than 50 active members)**

This small church can also be called a Family Church because it functions like a family with appropriate parental figures. It is the patriarchs and matriarchs who control the church's leadership needs. What Family Churches want from clergy is pastoral care, period. For clergy to assume that they are also the chief executive officer and the resident religious authority is to make a serious blunder. The key role of the patriarch or matriarch is to see to it that clergy do not take the congregation off on a new direction of ministry. Clergy are to serve as the chaplain of this small family. When clergy don't understand his, they are likely to head into a direct confrontation with the parental figure. It is generally suicide for clergy to get caught in a showdown with the patriarchs and matriarchs within the first five years of their ministry in that place. Clergy should not assume, however, that they have no role beyond pastoral care. In addition to providing quality worship and home/hospital visitation, clergy can play an important role as consultants to these patriarchs or matriarchs, befriending these parent figures and working alongside them, yet recognizing that when these parent figures decide against an idea, it's finished.

Clergy should watch out for the trap that is set when members complain to them about the patriarch or matriarch of the parish and encourage the pastor to take the parental figure on. Clergy who respond to such mutinous bids, expecting the congregation to back them in the showdown, betray their misunderstanding of the dynamics of small church ministry. The high turnover of clergy in these parishes has taught members that in the long run they have to live with old Mr. Schwartz who runs the feed-mill even when they don't like him. Hence it is far too risky for members to get caught siding with pastors who come arid go against their resident patriarch/matriarch.

Because these congregations usually cannot pay clergy an acceptable salary, many clergy see them as stepping stones to more rewarding opportunities. It is not unusual for a congregation of this size to list five successive clergy for every ten

years of congregational life. As Schaller claims, the longer the pastorates, the more powerful clergy become. The shorter the pastorates, the more powerful laity become. These Family Churches have to develop one or two strong lay leaders at the center of their life. How else would they manage their ongoing existence through those long vacancies and through the short pastorates of the ineffective clergy who are often sent their way?

Our president, Loren Mead, began his ministry in a Family Church in South Carolina. Later in his ministry he attended a clergy conference at which he discovered seven other clergy who had also started their ordained ministry in the same parish. As they talked, the seven clergy realized that, in view of the difference in their styles and the shortness of their tenures, the only way that parish survived was to take none of them seriously.

One of the worst places to go right out of seminary is to a Patriarchial/Matriarchial Church. Seminarians are up to their eyeballs in new theories and good ideas. They want to see if any of them work. Even though some of those good ideas might be the ticket to their small church's long-term growth and development, the church's openness to trying any of them is next to zero. Sometimes, through the sheer force of personal persuasion, a pastor will talk a congregation into trying a new program or two. Pretty soon parishioners find themselves coming to church events much more than they really need to or want to. As they begin then to withdraw their investment from these new programs, the clergy inevitably take it personally. Concluding that their gifts for ministry are not really valued in this place, they begin to seek a call elsewhere. On the way out of the church they give it a kick, letting the parish know in subtle ways that they are a miserable example of Christian community.

These small congregations have endured such recriminations for decades. The message they get from their executive is that they are a failure because they fail to grow while consuming inordinate amounts of time. Middle judicatories try to merge them, yoke them, close them-mostly to no avail. You can't kill these congregations with a stick. Large churches are far more vulnerable. An exec can place an incompetent pastor in a large church and lose 200 members in one year. Yet the same exec can throw incompetent clergy at Family Churches, leave them vacant for years, ignore them-all with little effect. The Family Church has learned to survive by relying on its own internal leadership.

These congregations need a pastor to stay and love them over at least ten years. This pastor would have to play by the rules and defer to the patriarch's or matriarch's leadership decisions for the first three to five years. At about year four or five, when the pastor did not leave, the congregation might find itself in somewhat of a crisis. At some level they would be saying, "What do you mean you are going to stay? No clergy stay here. There must be something the matter with you." Then the questioning might begin:

"Can we really trust you? Naw! You are going to leave us like all the rest." In this questioning we can see the pain of these congregations. For a minute, let's put ourselves in their shoes and imagine an ordained leader walking out on us every few years, berating us on the way out. Would we invest in the next pastor who came to us? Not likely! It would be simply too painful. The Family Church may have invested in one five years ago, only to find that the pastor left just when things started to move. Basically these people have learned not to trust clergy who repeatedly abandon ship when they see no evidence of church growth.

I conclude that we need to refrain from sending these congregations seminary trained pastors. History demonstrates that these churches have not been served well by full-time ordained clergy. The Episcopal Diocese of Nevada and the North Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church are among judicatories experimenting with employing persons indigenous to the communities, providing them with some basic training to give long-term pastoral care on a part-time basis. I believe long-term tent-making ministries offer the best possibility for ministering to many of these Patriarchial/Matriarchial congregations.

If denominations and middle judicatories persist in placing newly ordained clergy in these parishes, they should do so only after laying out this theory for these clergy, helping them discover who indeed are the patriarchs and matriarchs of the parish, suggesting some strategies for working with them. If these clergy find it simply too difficult to work with these parental figures, they need to let their executive know promptly. Rather than leaving these newly ordained clergy regretting they pursued ordained ministry in the first place, the exec should move them out of the Family Church.

### **The Pastoral Church (50 to 150 active members)**

Clergy are usually at the center of a Pastoral Church. There are so many parental figures around that they need someone at the center to manage them. A leadership circle, made up of the pastor and a small cadre of lay leaders, replaces the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Family Church. The power and effectiveness of the leadership circle depends upon good communication with the congregation and the ability of the pastor to delegate authority, assign responsibility, and recognize the accomplishments of others. Without such skill, the central pastoral function weakens the entire structure. The clergy person becomes overworked, isolated, and exhausted, may be attacked by other leaders, and finally the harmony of the fellowship circle degenerates.

A key feature of a Pastoral Church is that lay persons experience having their spiritual needs met through their personal relationship with a seminary trained person. In a Pastoral Church it would be rare for a Bible study or a prayer group to meet without the pastor. The pastor is also readily available in times of personal need and crisis. If a parishioner called the pastor and indicated that she needed some personal attention, the pastor would drop over to see her, probably that

afternoon but certainly within the week-a qualitatively different experience from being told that the first available appointment to see the pastor in her office is two weeks from now. The time demands upon the pastor of a Pastoral Church can become oppressive. However, most members will respond with loyalty to a reasonable level of attention and guidance from this central figure.

A second feature of the Pastoral Church is its sense of itself as a family where everyone knows everyone else. If you show up at church with your daughter Julie by the hand, everyone will greet you and Julie, too. When congregations begin to have 130 to 150 people coming every Sunday morning they begin to get nervous. As Carl Dudley put it in *Unique Dynamics of the Small Church*,<sup>2</sup> they begin to feel 'stuffed.' Members wonder about the new faces that they don't know-people who don't know them. Are they beginning to lose the intimate fellowship they prize so highly?

Clergy also begin to feel stressed when they have more than 150 active members whom they try to know in depth. In fact, this is one of the reasons why clergy may keep the Pastoral Church from growing to the next larger size congregation-the Program Church. If clergy have the idea firmly fixed in their head that they are ineffective as a pastor unless they can relate in a profound and personal way with every member of the parish, then 150 active members (plus perhaps an even larger number of inactive members) is about all one person can manage.

There are some clergy who function at their highest level of effectiveness in the Pastoral Church. Given the different clusters of skills required for other sizes of congregations, some clergy should consider spending their entire career in this size congregation. Since the Pastoral Church can offer a pastor a decent salary, clergy do tend to stick around longer. If clergy can regard themselves as successful only when they become pastor of a large congregation, then 65% of mainline Protestant clergy are going to end their career with feelings of failure. Two thirds of mainline Protestant congregations are either Family- or Pastoral-sized churches.

Clergy with strong interpersonal skills fare well in the Pastoral-sized church. These clergy can feed continually on the richness of direct involvement in the highs and lows of people's lives. Clergy who enjoy being at the center of most activities also do well. There are lots of opportunities to preach and lead in worship and to serve as primary instructor in many class settings for both young and old. Outgoing, expressive persons seem to be the best match for the style of ministry in the Pastoral Church. An open, interactive leadership style also seems to suit this size church best.

Growth in the Pastoral Church will depend mainly on the popularity and effectiveness of the pastor. People join the church because they like the interaction between pastor and people. When new people visit the congregation for the first time, it is likely to be the pastor who will make the follow-up house call.

When some congregations grow to the point where their pastor's time and energy is drawn off into many other activities and the one-on-one pastoral relationship begins to suffer, they may hire additional staff to handle these new functions so their pastor can once again have plenty of time for interpersonal caring. Unfortunately, this strategy will have limited success. To begin with, when you hire additional staff you then have a multiple staff, which requires staff meetings, supervision, delegation, evaluation, and planning. These activities draw the pastor deeper into administration. Then, too, additional staff members tend to specialize in such things as Christian education, youth ministry, evangelism, or stewardship, which tends to add to the administrative role of the head of staff rather than freeing his/her time up for pastoral care.

As we move to the next size congregation, notice the change in the diagram of the church's structure. Clergy consider a congregation's transition from Pastoral to Program size the most difficult. One can expect enormous resistance on the part of a Pastoral Church as it flirts with becoming a Program Church. Many churches make an unconscious choice not to make the transition and keep hovering around the level of 150 active members. The two treasured features of a Pastoral Church that will be lost if it becomes a Program Church are ready access to their religious leader and the feeling of oneness as a church family, where everyone knows everyone else and the church can function as a single cell community.

Two things prevent a congregation from making that transition. The first barrier is found in the clergy. When clergy hold onto a need to be connected in depth to all the active members, then they become the bottleneck to growth. The second barrier is found in the lay leaders who are unwilling to have many of their spiritual needs met by anyone except their ordained leader.

It is most helpful to put this theory up on newsprint before the chief decision-making body of the church and ask them where they think they are as a parish. If they have been saying 'yes, yes' to church growth with their lips, but no, no" with their behavior, this theory can bring their resistance to the conscious level by pointing out the real costs they will face in growing. Churches tend to grow when parish leaders, fully aware of the cost of growth, make a conscious decision to proceed.

Without the backing of key lay leaders, the cost of moving from a Pastoral to a Program Church usually comes out of the pastor's hide. The parish may welcome the pastor's efforts in parish program development while still expecting all the parish calling and one-on-one work to continue at the same high level as before. Burnout and/or a forced pastoral termination can often result.

## **The Program Church (150 to 350 active members)**

The Program Church grows out of the necessity for a high-quality personal relationship with the pastor to be supplemented by other avenues of spiritual feeding. Programs must now begin to fulfill that role.

The, well functioning Program Church has many cells of activity, which are headed up by lay leaders. These lay leaders, in addition to providing structure and guidance for these cells, also take on some pastoral functions. The Stewardship Committee gathers for its monthly meeting and the committee chair asks about a missing member. Upon being told that Mary Steward's daughter had to be taken to the hospital for an emergency operation, the chair will allow time for expressions of concern for Mary and her daughter. The chair may include both of them in an opening prayer. If the teacher of an adult class notices that someone in the class is feeling depressed, the teacher will often take the class member aside and inquire about his well-being. Even if the teacher eventually asks the pastor to intervene, the pastor has already gotten a lot of assistance from this lay leader.

Clergy are still at the center of the Program Church, but their role has shifted dramatically. Much of their time and attention must be spent in planning with other lay leaders to ensure the highest quality programs. The pastor must spend a lot of time recruiting people to head up these smaller ministries, training, supervising, and evaluating them and seeing to it that their morale remains high. In essence the pastor must often step back from direct ministry with people to coordinate and support volunteers who offer this ministry. Unless the pastor gives high priority to their spiritual and pastoral needs, those programs will suffer.

To be sure, a member can expect a hospital or home call from the pastor when personal crisis or illness strikes. But members had better not expect this pastor to have a lot of time to drink coffee in people's kitchens. To see the pastor about a parish matter, they will probably have to make an appointment at the church office several weeks in advance.

When clergy move from a Pastoral Church to a Program Church, unless they are able to shift from a primarily interpersonal mode to a program planning and development mode, they will experience tension and difficulty in their new congregation. It is not that clergy will have no further need for their interpersonal skills. Far from it-they need to depend on them even more. But now those interpersonal skills will be placed at the service of the parish program.

Key skills for effective ministry in a Program Church begin with the ability to pull together the diverse elements of the parish into a mission statement. Helping the parish arrive at a consensus about its direction is essential. Next the pastor must be able to lead the parish toward attaining the goals that arise out of that consensus. In the Program Church, clergy need to be able to stand firmly at the center of that consensus. To wilt in the face of opposition to this consensus will be seen as a lack

of leadership ability. The Program Church pastor will also need to be able to motivate the most capable lay persons in the parish to take on key components of the parish vision and help make it become a reality. Developing the trust and loyalty of these parish leaders and ensuring their continued spiritual growth and development is another key part of the cluster of skills needed in the Program-sized Church.

For clergy who get their primary kicks out of direct pastoral care work, ministry in a Program Church may leave them with a chronic feeling of flatness and lack of fulfillment. Unless these clergy can learn to derive satisfaction from the work of pastoral administration they should think twice about accepting a call to this size parish.

### **The Corporate Church (350 or more active members)**

The quality of Sunday morning worship is the first thing you usually notice in a Corporate Church. Because these churches usually have abundant resources, they will usually have the finest organ and one of the best choirs in town. A lot of work goes into making Sunday worship a rich experience. The head of staff usually spends more time than other clergy preparing for preaching and worship leadership.

In very large Corporate Churches, the head of staff may not even remember the names of many parishioners. When members are in the hospital, it is almost taken for granted that they will be visited by an associate or assistant pastor, rather than the senior pastor. Those who value highly the Corporate Church experience are willing to sacrifice a personal connection with the senior pastor in favor of the Corporate Church's variety and quality of program offerings.

Sometimes the head pastor is so prominent that the personage of the pastor acquires a legendary quality, especially in the course of a long pastorate. Few may know this person well, but the role does not require it. The head pastor becomes a symbol of unity and stability in a very complicated congregational life.

The Corporate Church is distinguished from the Program Church by its complexity and diversity. The patriarchs and matriarchs return, but now as the governing boards who formally, not just informally, control the church's life and future. Laity lead on many levels, and the Corporate Church provides opportunity to move up the ladder of influence.

Key to the success of the Corporate Church is the multiple staff and its ability to manage the diversity of its ministries in a collegial manner. Maintaining energy and momentum in a Corporate Church is very difficult when there is division within the parish staff. Any inability to work together harmoniously is especially evident during Sunday worship where any tensions among the ordained leadership of the parish will manifest themselves in subtle ways.

It is at this point that clergy making the transition to the Corporate Church find themselves most vulnerable and unsupported. Our denominational systems do little to equip clergy to work collegially within a multiple staff. A three-day workshop on the multiple staff is a bare introduction. Leaders in industry with a master's degree in personnel management still make serious mistakes in hiring and developing leaders for the corporation. The head of staff of a Corporate Church learns to manage a multiple staff by trial and error. Sacrificing a few associate and assistant clergy on the altar of experience is the price the church pays for such lack of training.

For the most part we clergy are not taught to work collegially. In seminary we compete with one another for grades. Each of us retreats to his or her own cubicle to write term papers. There is little interaction in class. In seminary we don't really have to take each other seriously. This might change if, for example, a professor were to assign four seminarians to complete research on a church doctrine, write one paper, and receive a group grade. In that kind of learning atmosphere, we would have to take one another on and argue about our different theological perspectives and forms of piety. Unless our training can begin to equip us for collegial ministry, our seminaries will continue to turn out lone rangers who don't really have to work with other clergy until they get to the Corporate Church or the larger Program Church. By that time our patterns have been set.

The clergy who are called as head of staff in a Corporate Church are usually multi-skilled persons who have proven their skill in a great variety of pastoral situations. Now, however, in a multiple staff, the senior minister will need to delegate some of those pastoral tasks to other full-time staff members, who will inevitably want to do them differently. Learning to allow these people to do things their own way is in itself a major new demand.

Our research with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator indicates that congregations are best served when the multiple staff includes different types. The more diverse the staff, the greater its ability to minister to a diverse congregation. But this requirement for diversity makes multiple staff functioning more complicated: the more diverse the staff, the harder it is to understand and support one another's ministries.

Lay leaders are generally completely baffled by the inability of ordained people to work collegially. "If our religious leaders aren't able to get along, what hope is there for this world?" they may wonder. Lay leaders could help enormously by seeing to it that there is money in the budget for regular consultative help for the staff. This help is not needed only when tensions arise. Multiple staffs need to be meeting regularly with an outside consultant to keep lines of communication open and difficulties surfaced.

When the multiple staff is having fun working well together, this graceful collegiality becomes contagious throughout the Corporate Church. Lay people

want to get on board and enjoy the camaraderie. The parish has little difficulty filling the many volunteer jobs needed to run a Corporate Church.

In addition to learning to manage a multiple staff, clergy making the transition to head of staff need to hone their administrative skills. These clergy are becoming chief executive officers of substantive operations. Yet I would emphasize leadership skills over management skills. While managers can manage the energy of a parish, leaders can *generate* energy. The Corporate Church needs leaders who know how to build momentum. Otherwise, even when managed well, these large churches run out of gas and begin to decline.

In summary, the most difficult transitions in size are from Pastoral to Program or, when downsizing, from Program to Pastoral. These are two very different ways to be church. More is required than a theoretical vision of the shift. We need to deal with the fact that a shift in size at this level just doesn't feel right to people. Somewhere deep inside they begin to sense that it doesn't feel like church anymore.

In order to help clergy and key lay leaders grasp the difference between these two sizes of churches, I have developed a simple questionnaire that I call a differentiation exercise. Rather than have an audience simply circle answers to prepared questions, I like to send the "a's" to one side of the room and the "b's" to the other side. You can see at a glance where everyone stands on an issue, and the two groups can talk to each other about their choices. Since the questions deal with choices clergy need to make between two competing activities, I ask clergy to remain silent until the lay leaders have answered. Then I ask clergy what their personal preferences are on each question. I encourage clergy to choose the activity they would most enjoy rather than the one they believe might claim a higher parish priority. Here are the questions:

### **Choice Points for Clergy**

If your pastor has only limited time available in his/her week, would you prefer that he/she choose to:

- A. Do more visiting to shut-ins?
- B. Put more time into sermon preparation?
  
- A. Attend a wedding reception?
- B. Go on a retreat with parish staff?
  
- A. Call on prospective members?
- B. Conduct a training session for church officers?
  
- A. Visit a bereaved family?
- B. Help two church officers resolve a conflict?

A. Make a hospital call on a fringe member?

B. Attend a continuing education event?

A. Engage in pastoral counseling with members?

B. Attend a planning event with officers?

A. Do more parish calling?

B. Recruit leaders for parish events?

A. Attend an activity with parish youth?

B. Critique a meeting with a church officer?

I have discovered several things in using this questionnaire:

- Congregations may be Program size yet still require their clergy to attend to all the "a" activities. This is a perfect prescription for burnout. It can also lead to scapegoating clergy as "bad" because they don't accomplish all the tasks in the "a" column while they are also expected to crank out quality programs for the parish.
- Some clergy in Pastoral-sized Churches should be focusing their energies and attention on the "a" activities. But because their background or training is in Program Churches, they continue to concentrate on the "b" activities or feel guilty because they aren't doing so.
- Clergy and laity often disagree on priorities for clergy. This exercise often surfaces those differences quickly and makes role negotiation possible.

## **Staffing for Growth**

Some congregations do not grow because they are not staffed for growth. If, for example, you are a Program Church, expecting your pastor to assist you in developing and executing quality programs in the church, yet you also expect your pastor to do pastoral calling in homes, you probably have a pastor who is doing neither task well and is burning out trying to do it all. Unless those pastoral expectations change or you add more staff, the congregation will not grow, as members are going to be dissatisfied with both the programs that are offered and the fact that they are not receiving the pastoral care they desire.

As a rule of thumb, if you desire to staff for growth, you need one full-time program person on your staff for every one hundred active members. (This does not include support staff such as janitors or secretaries.) *Active members* refers to how many are attending worship on the average year around. You are staffing for maintenance if you are just slightly under that figure. You are staffing for decline if you are seriously under that figure.

Growing churches see that their members as well as their visitors receive adequate pastoral care during times of crisis or need. People well cared for pastorally are inclined to invite their friends and family members to become affiliated with their

parish. When a new family to your area is having difficulty, having a staff member make a call to discover ways the parish can meet needs makes a deep impression. Without that call, they are less likely to think of joining your congregation.

The addition of a paid professional, i.e., youth worker, religious education specialist, business manager, usually pays for itself within twelve to eighteen months. For example, a congregation with 225 active members that hires a third full-time staff member to provide better quality ministry will most likely grow to 300 members.

## **Part II: When Membership Declines**

There are times when, no matter how capable, clergy cannot reverse the downward slide of congregational membership. The reasons may be simply demographic: at times certain areas of the country become depressed and begin to decline in population. In these areas, the older people may stay, but younger workers need to move elsewhere to find work.

What then are the parish dynamics when a congregation becomes smaller? What do clergy moving into those congregations need to pay attention to when the membership shrinks to the next size?

### **From Corporate to Program Size Church**

The first thing these congregations are likely to lose is their ability to support a large multiple staff. The decision to cut down the full- and part-time church staff requires care. Areas of ministry that have been managed by the core staff will need to be turned over to church volunteers. All Corporate Churches depend upon volunteers to do much of the work. Lay leaders who chair important committees have had the benefit of a staff person to confer with and to manage some of the administrative work of the committees. When staff is cut, these lay volunteers will need to take charge more fully, delegating the follow-through work that was previously carried out by a staff person.

Corporate Churches often have amassed some endowment funds. There will be a strong temptation to use some of these funds to support certain staff positions with the rationale that these staff members will help the church regain its former size. Such a strategy needs to be evaluated carefully. It may set the staff members up for failure because the church lacks the commitment, energy, and potential to make these former ministries flourish. Instead, new areas of ministry, which do have vision and commitment behind them, may need to be developed. If so, they will discover their own funding and not be dependent upon endowment funds.

Deciding which staff positions to cut is difficult work, yet it must be done. It is easy to get caught between loyalties to faithful, hardworking staff members and a mission emphasis that might dictate retaining areas of ministry that do not correspond with present staff persons' skills.

The place to start with all these decisions is to engage the core leadership of the parish in an assessment and planning process. I would recommend engaging an outside consultant and allowing plenty of time for this period of reflection, letting go, assessment, and goal setting. I recommend beginning with a historical reflection process in which members can review the history of the parish, identify the strengths that have characterized the church's past and that need to be built into its future. Leaders can then confront directly some of the reasons for the decline in membership. Important grieving needs to take place during this process. To move too quickly to a mission statement would be to short-circuit an important developmental stage in moving to a new identity as a Program Church. People are going to have to let go of an image and an identity of being the biggest and the best. The Program Church has many strengths, yet the core leaders may not see those strengths because they have not adequately dealt with their grief about the death of "Old First Church."

### **From Program to Pastoral Church**

Just as the movement from Pastoral Church to Program Church is experienced as the most difficult and traumatic, so moving from Program to Pastoral Church will present the congregation with a difficult transition. An identity needs to be relinquished. The wonderful team of volunteers that made everything happen in the church has largely disappeared. Many probably left because of burnout and sought a Corporate Church where they could rest and have their wounds healed.

There may be a faithful remaining core who will be tempted to try to pump the church up again by sheer commitment and energy. This faithful remnant needs to be spared the discouragement inherent in such an effort. Some serious downsizing needs to take place whereby all the separate program emphases of the parish are collapsed into a few small working groups. For example, rather than having separate committees for Evangelism, Stewardship, Christian Education, Property, Social Ministry, Music, and Worship, these all may need to be combined into a Committee on Parish Life or to be reclaimed by the Vestry/ Session/Council/Consistory. One person on these decision-making groups can receive all the mail from the national church on one particular program emphasis. That person will occasionally head up a task force to accomplish certain goals in that area of ministry when such an effort is deemed important by the chief decision-making body.

The key issue in downsizing from Program to Pastoral Church is the responsible management of volunteer energies. A Program Church that shrinks to Pastoral size will surely burn out its lay leaders. Soon cynicism, disillusionment, and fatigue begin to permeate the whole parish. People start serving on two or three committees just to keep them afloat. It's difficult to get the committees to do anything significant because everyone is simply too tired.

The downsizing strategy may include suspending all parish committees and programs and declaring sabbaticals for all parish leaders. Whatever activities occur

in the parish during this time should be focused on the spiritual nurture of these parish leaders. The sabbatical period should end with a retreat or workshop at which members are invited to assess where God seems to be calling them to serve.

During or following this period of suspended activity, key leaders can be invited to an assessment and planning process. What is a parish identity that is both viable and energy-generating? Once members have gone through the process of grieving the loss of their former identity, they can discern a vision of the Pastoral Church that fills them with hope and excitement. Can this group once again find energy in doing things as a single unit, such as having parish dinners and activities in which everyone can participate? As they move from multiple services to one worship service, can they begin to feel the advantages of having everyone worshipping together again?

Finally, can they begin to appreciate having more quality time with their pastor? Can they begin to allow their pastor to become the primary source of their spiritual feeding? What was done formerly in formal program settings can now be done informally around the edges. The pastor can once again know my teen-age son personally rather than having to insure that there is a youth group to minister to him. The pastor needs to let go of many administrative and program development tasks and begin to appear in people's lives in a variety of informal settings. Visiting people in their places of employment to experience the context of 'a person's lay ministry might be a good place to start. People will let go of some of their program needs much more easily when they begin to feel more cared for personally.

### **Moving From Pastoral to Family Sized Church**

This transition will be inaugurated by a congregation's discovery that it can no longer support a full-time ordained person. This is likely to occur when a pastor resigns, and in working things through with their middle judicatory officials, the church leaders become clear that they can no longer afford a pay package that will meet the minimum salary scale set by the denomination.

This discovery is often a traumatic point in the life of a parish. Members see inability to afford their own pastor as a sign of failure. For many of the older members, the loss is seen in no longer having a pastor to live in their parsonage. We should not underestimate the unconscious anxiety that is produced in the lives of many people when they realize they do not have a religious authority available to them around the clock in their community. They may rarely have taken advantage of the opportunity to call on the services of the person living in their parsonage, yet it was more the possibility than the actuality that was important to them.

One of the clear advantages of a congregation moving from a Pastoral to a Family Size Church is that such an abnormally high percentage of their income does not now have to go into supporting a pastor. They may find they have some money to support other kinds of parish activities.

The other advantage, which may come as a blessing in disguise, is that members need to get clear about what pastoral services are essential to them in order for them to function well as a religious community. That clarity has the effect of helping the parish leaders also become clear about the roles and responsibilities that will not be covered by a pastor and that need to be picked up by lay volunteers. Seen in a positive light, this clarity can open up opportunities for fulfilling ministries for some lay leaders.

True to its nature as a Patriarchial/Matriarchial Church, the parish needs to assume control of its own life, taking over all leadership functions and delegating pastoral care ministries to clergy. The members need to stay focused on the direction of their parish and not allow it to be swayed by the ideas of clergy who have only a temporary investment in the parish.

### **From Family Sized Church to Nonexistence**

There have been congregations that, when confronted with the alternative of either living or dying, have made the conscious decision to die. In the process of dying well they generated so much energy that they changed their minds. One UCC congregation in St. Louis hired an interim pastor who was to help them die well. That was eight years ago. They are a thriving congregation.

A Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in Bethesda, Maryland, voted two years ago to terminate their life, and they have effectively done so, merging their assets with a neighboring congregation. Their long-term pastor saw them through the closure and was himself awarded a sabbatical once the parish had closed. Their decision was quite deliberate, and even though they had endowment funds that could have kept them open, they chose instead to end with dignity and merge with a neighboring congregation.

The above two examples are anecdotal data on congregational closures. I suspect there are more such examples. It would be helpful if someone would undertake to compile a variety of models from which congregations may choose. In this era of church decline I believe we need to get better at shutting down more quickly and effectively. There are some congregations that need and want to die. Dying well is qualitatively different from simply fading into oblivion. We need to learn how to help churches die well.

### **NOTES**

- Rothauge, Arlin. *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*. New York: The Episcopal Church Center, 815 Second Ave., New York 10017.
- Dudley, Carl. *Unique Dynamics of the Small Church*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute. Another helpful book is Lyle Schaller's *Looking in the Mirror* (Abingdon Press 1984).