



From Your “Choosing Growth” Pastor (Part II)

When You Grow, There Are Issues!

Last issue I dealt with the need to choose our path forward as a congregation. I asserted that we have a “vocation” to grow in numbers, prompted both by Jesus’ Great Commission and the choice we have already made to be a healthy and vital congregation.

Growth, however, has its costs, most significantly in three areas: use of the pastor’s time, familiarity with the people in the congregation, and the loss of some institutional memory.

According to Alice Mann, our expert on the transition from “Pastoral” church to “Program” church, in a growing church like ours, ministers are faced with the issue of shrinking discretionary time. In a program church, the schedule fills up with events and meetings, far more than exists in a pastoral sized church. Folks may find it harder catch me for a “drop in” visit at the church office; the first person from the church who visits you in the hospital may not be Pastor Ken but a lay person; some committees may have to meet without the pastor present. The pastor ceases to be at the center of everything; the pastor becomes the keeper of the big picture and the teacher of lay leaders. Mann cautions that if this transition from pastoral-size to program-size isn’t planned carefully and handled well, folks will become disenchanted with the pastor, or the pastor may get completely disillusioned and ‘burnt out,’ or, most likely, both.

Another behavior, says Alice Mann, which is typical of congregations in the transition we face is a deep ambivalence about newcomers: aren't they wonderful...but I used to know everybody. Isn't it great that the church school is burgeoning...I don't want to pay for a half-time religious education director. Ambivalence is one of the biggest hallmarks of a size transition, and it is a difficult place to be. "It is energy draining," said Mann. But you can't resolve ambivalence without facing into the conflict, facing it squarely and saying, “there is a choice to be made here.” What is our identity as a congregation? What is our purpose? Does the church exist simply to serve the present congregation, or, at least theoretically, does it exist for those who aren’t here yet? Churches that break through the question of Christian identity and purpose, and get on with it are often the ones that are able to navigate through this period of ambivalence and uncertainty.

The third area of concern that arises in our kind of transition is the diminishment of a collective memory. New people don’t remember the congregation’s past, its heroes and villains, and the way challenges have been faced before. Increasingly, new folks will ask, “why?” and “who’s that?” when procedures and people of the past are discussed. New

leaders might be creative in ways that are drastically at variance to the ways things have gotten accomplished before. To those in the church with the longest memories and most highly formed loyalties, large scale changes by people with shallow roots may seem like disrespect, even heresy.

The memory that will prepare us for the future, however, is not the collective memory of a 188 year old congregation, but the memory of the last half-decade. First Baptist Church was diminished, now it is vital. We got this way by believing in the promise of Resurrection and by trusting each other and the Holy Spirit. We will claim our future with the same tools of faith.

Next time I'll reflect a bit more about the current transition, particularly relating to our building and parking, our staffing, and the "infrastructure" of transition.

Pastor Ken