

# Reflections On Congregational Life CONSEQUENCES

by  
Peter Rudowski  
December 2009

## Reflections On Congregational Life is a service of the Southern Ohio Synod, ELCA

All decisions (which include the implementation of new ministry programs, the elimination of ministries that once served a congregation well but are no longer effective, and decisions to maintain the status-quo) have consequences. Therefore, before decisions are made and ministry programs implemented, five potential consequences should be considered by congregational leaders. These consequences are identified through five questions: 1. Is this decision setting or changing a policy? 2. Who will leave because of this decision? 3. Who are the primary stakeholders in the decision and its implementation? 4. Who is saying "yes" and who is saying "no?" 5. Who will be experiencing loss? The benefits of raising these questions are: 1. The potential of accepting and implementing a decision by members will be increased. 2. The potential of dissonance and conflict over the decision and its implementation will be reduced. And, 3. These questions encourage chaplaincy care for members and the corporate body.

### Is A Policy Being Established?

A group asks the pastor for permission to have a Christmas bazaar. The purpose of the bazaar is three-fold: 1. It will revitalize the group by giving it a visible, tangible task. 2. It encourages group members to invite non-members to participate in the bazaar. 3. The proceeds from the bazaar will be given to a local hospital's children's ward. One of the things leaders need to consider in granting or withholding permission is: How will their decision be interpreted by other groups and individuals in the congregation? If permission is granted, should the leaders expect another group to ask for permission to have a fund raising event? (If permission is given to one group should not all groups have the same privileges?) Since the congregation has honored its denomination's wishes to avoid fund raising events, will granting permission for the bazaar be interpreted as a change in the fund raising policy previously practiced by the congregation? A "simple" permission giving decision can have long-term implications.

### Who Will Leave Because Of This Decision?

When decisions are made concerning: 1. a building or renovation program, 2. the addition or elimination of a ministry program such as a worship service, 3. the retaining or firing of a staff person, or 4. the conscious or subconscious decision to do nothing, there is always

the potential to lose members.

**Building** When a new building or renovation is being considered, one of the consequences is that up to 10% of the membership may leave the congregation. The reason is usually philosophical; i.e., the congregation should spend its financial resources on ministries serving people rather than on bricks and mortar. It is very possible that in the short-term there will be a drop in membership but in the long-term a new or renovated building, designed to expand ministry, normally results in numerical growth. By anticipating the consequence of members leaving, leaders can develop a strategy to reduce the potential of loss in membership. The strategy for member retention can also prevent a small minority from sabotaging a building program.

**Adding or eliminating a worship service** Adding or eliminating a worship service disrupts schedules for individuals and groups. For example, if a second worship service is added, there is a good possibility that those meeting for breakfast before worship will divide because some in the group will attend the new service. Or, if the early worship service is eliminated, those who have commitments later on Sunday morning will not be able to worship in their congregation. In both examples, disruption of established worship patterns always has the potential for loss of members. Leaders need to ask: Who do we expect will join and who will leave because of this change?

**Firing a staff person** All staff members, whether they are members of the congregation or not, have their supporters and detractors. If a staff member will not or cannot fulfill his or her responsibilities, the number of supporters will be small. Not to dismiss this person on competency issues creates dissonance within the congregation. Not to fire may even cause some members to become less active or leave because they perceive the congregation does not care about its ministry goals.

On the other hand, it becomes much more difficult to fire a staff person who does enough "right" to keep his or her position while continually falling short of meeting expectations. The consequence of firing the staff person is the displeasure and/or anger of those who support that staff person. Often these members become less active or leave the congregation to protest the firing. On the other hand, the consequence of keeping the staff person frustrates and alienates those who are painfully aware of the staff person's deficiencies.

**Doing nothing** Often congregations will become passive in decision making out of fear of losing members. Consciously or subconsciously, leaders postpone decision making believing that maintaining the status-quo is the best way to have peace and harmony. But the reality is that doing nothing has the consequence of losing those who have a passion for ministry and especially ministry to those outside the congregation's membership. Those with a passion for ministry volunteer, try to create a climate of hospitality, and financially support their congregation. When their passion is not supported by the pastor and other members, they leave out of frustration.

In summary, one of the consequences of decisions and their implementation is the potential loss of members. The ultimate question is, Which members are the leadership willing to lose? Are they willing to lose those who want to build new ministries, make existing ministries more efficient, and/or increase the ministry portfolio of a congregation? Or, are leaders reluctantly willing to lose those who want to maintain the status-quo with the justification that the status-quo creates peace and harmony in the congregation?

### **Who Are The Stakeholders?**

Not all groups are equal in the decision making process. In decision making, the group most closely associated with the ministry under discussion has the greater say in what is being considered. For example, if a congregation is debating the purchase an electronic organ costing \$100,000 or a pipe organ costing \$475,000, who has the the larger sphere of influence? In the discussion, there are those who believe that an "expensive" electronic organ can be tuned to match any organ in the world. Therefore, the electronic organ is very acceptable and a great deal less expensive than a pipe organ. There are also those who insist that only a pipe organ is a true musical instrument. This view is held by the music staff and a large majority of the choir members. Two-thirds of the membership is neutral concerning the purchase of the organ.

In the scenario above, there are a number of consequences to be considered in the decision making process. To purchase the pipe organ is to support the primary stakeholders, i.e., the music staff and choir. Such support raises the morale of these stakeholders. It is also public recognition of the music ministry. The consequence of purchasing the electronic organ creates a feeling of disappointment in the music staff and choir which could easily lead to low morale. There is also the possibility of the music staff resigning because they believe the congregation does not support the music program.

Deciding for the pipe organ assumes that those favoring this decision will provide the majority of funds for its purchase. Those who are opposed or neutral will not be anxious to give. On the other hand, those favoring the pipe organ will, in all likelihood, not contribute to the purchase of an electronic organ.

### **Who Is Saying "Yes" or "No"?**

When a change, either by addition or subtraction, is being proposed, two percent of the congregation will immediately say "yes" and two percent will say "no." Twelve percent want to say "yes" but need to be convinced and 12 % want to say "no" but need to be convinced. The rest of the congregation (72%) watch how many are saying "yes" and how many are saying "no." Experts in the change process contend that when 20% of the congregation says "yes" the majority of those sitting on the sidelines will also say "yes."

Leaders need to be constantly aware of who is talking to them. If leaders only listens to those who immediately say "yes," a false sense of security emerges. This false sense of security leads to great disappointment if the change is not implemented. If leaders listen only to those who automatically say "no," the consequence is discouragement and a good idea is abandoned prematurely. (Too often congregations concede veto power to this two percent.) If leaders believe that those who are asking questions are hostile, the consequence is alienation of those who want to be convinced that the change is needed. In summary, determining who is saying "yes" or "no" makes the task of initiating change much more reliable.

### **Loss**

One of the consequences of change is loss. For example, a change in schedule creates a loss of a familiar routine. When options are added such as a new worship service, there is a fear of loss of friends who do not choose the same option. As a congregation grows larger, some leaders and long-tenured members fear the loss of influence. The addition of new members to a group that has met for years creates a potential loss of tradition and current operating norms.

Leaders can address the consequences of loss in three ways: 1. Acknowledging the loss. Denying the loss drives it under the surface where it can grow like a cancer 2. Listen and accept the pain of those experiencing loss. Their pain can have the same intensity as the loss of a loved one. 3. Assure those experiencing loss that they will still be important and loved when the change is implemented.

In conclusion, every decision has consequences. If leaders in the decision making process ignore identifying those consequences, they do so at their own peril.

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*Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail: prudowski@fuse.net He is the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering to your Congregation Through its Organizational System. The book is available through xlibris.com, amazon.com, and barnsandnoble.com*