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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Should We Unleash the Power of Congregational Planning?

A traveler on an October flight to Chicago was seated by a little boy who was obviously traveling alone. The little boy seemed nervous, so the traveler tried to engage him in conversation: "Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?"

"No," the boy replied. "I don't even know what I'm going to be for Halloween!"

That level of planning is not a big liability for little boys, but it is for most organizations. What allowed Wal-Mart to replace Sears in retail market share? Why did Southwest Airlines steadily increase market share at the expense of American, Delta, and United? It seems that in older companies the leaders tend to drift into the future while focused on what worked in the past.

Does that kind of drifting-mentality happen in congregations? In most churches, the answer is yes. Like corporations, congregations do not *consciously* resist planning. Their failure to plan more often rests on the assumption that they are *already doing* sufficient planning. "Isn't that what we're doing at all these meetings of committees and governing boards?" one pastor asked.

But all of those meetings throughout the year sometimes blind church leaders to the fact that they are not watching the congregation's overall, big-picture direction. Thus, the church easily begins acting like an ocean liner in which the engine room is in perfect running order and the galley puts out excellent meals—while the ship sails confidently toward abrupt connection with a rocky coast ten miles ahead.

After a church decides that drifting into the future is inappropriate behavior for an organization that God has called to serve the people in its surrounding community for decades to come, its leaders must understand the value of an effective planning process.

Why Do Congregational Planning?

Several centuries ago Niccolo Machiavelli warned us in his book, *The Prince,* that "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

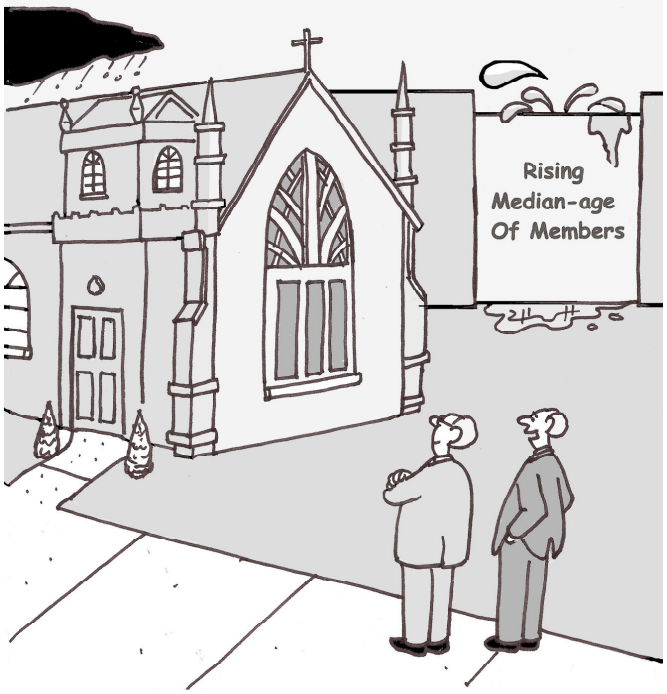
Why, then, should a church bother with planning? Without continuously fine-tuning its overall focus and ministries, a church can (a) feel satisfied with itself and (b) experience long-term failure in its health and vitality.

1. Planning keeps a church connected with the needs of people in its surrounding community and culture. The Moravian Book Shop, founded in 1745 by a congregation in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is the oldest bookstore in the nation. Why did that church establish a book store? Because at that point in history, in that community and that culture, making books available to people was a significant ministry.

Does every church need a book store? Not necessarily. But every church needs to frequently and systematically involve its attendees in asking, "In our community, on this page in history, what can we do to help the largest possible number of people enrich their lives by loving God and loving their neighbors?"

2. Planning keeps the older age groups in touch with the thinking and needs of younger adults, their teenagers, and their children. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "At eighteen our convictions are hills from which we look; at forty-five they are caves in which we hide."

Planning keeps generational viewpoints connected in ways that produce new insights, so that their church has great years in its future, not just in its past.



"The church has been here for 76 years. I don't think we need to be concerned about its future."

3. Planning helps us to respect what other people want, not just what we want. The thinking and aspirations of every church member are driven by "what I want most for myself and my congregation."

When influential church members get frozen in the trajectory of what they want, they often lose the ability to hear what others want. The communication produced by an effective planning process helps unfreeze the perspectives of well-meaning people who, without realizing it, are building failure into their church's DNA.

4. Planning helps us to reduce and prevent the pain of congregational conflict. Historical facts—such as ten-year worship-attendance trends and Sunday school attendance trends—are important to a church's future. Such statistical facts tend to surface during an effective planning process. And the *feelings* that people have regarding those *facts* are equally important.

When parishioners have an opportunity to communicate their strongly held feelings in non-threatening circumstances, (a) wounds often heal, or are prevented, and (b) churches often find solutions to complex problems.

5. Planning helps us to overcome our inclination to retreat to what worked in the past, so common during times of anxiety and stress. People who grew up along the Mississippi River know that, during times of duress, the only direction a crawfish will move is backward. When a church experiences the stress of changing times, changing pastors, changing finances, or changing circumstances, the temptation to retreat to what worked in past years—rather than figuring out what works in the present—often exerts a strong pull. An effective planning process can prevent that often-fatal reflex.

6. Planning helps us to overcome the church-killing idolatry to sameness. Examine the sleeve of a man's coat and you find two buttons, and sometimes three, or maybe four. Why? Custom put them there—and kept them there. We are told that in the monasteries of centuries past, the monks wore long robes that made eating their soup difficult—so they sewed buttons on their sleeves to keep them out of the soup.

Churches tend to retain all kinds of buttons from decades past, and their members are loath to remove those vestiges of what served a vital purpose in years past—once-valuable traditions that are no longer meaningful to most of their people. [J. Wallace Hamilton, *Still The Trumpet Sounds* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), p. 171]

A good planning process helps a church to trim non-productive buttons with fewer painful repercussions. By doing effective planning, we can claim that middle ground between destructive idolatry to sameness and frenetic idolatry to every new theory.

7. Planning helps us keep our congregation's crucial ministries in balance. Five behaviors marked effectiveness in the ancient church: *Kerygma* (proclamation of the Gospel); *Koinonia* (community/fellowship); *Diaconia* (compassionate service); *Didache* (teaching the Christian faith); and *Leiturgia* (worship/communal prayer). Effective planning strengthens achievement in all five of those behaviors—protecting a congregation from leaving out one or more ministries crucial to its future.

8. Planning generates hope. John Steinbeck eloquently wrote, "Hope implies a change from the present bad situation to a future better one. The slave hopes for freedom, the weary man for rest, and the hungry food. And the feeders of hope, economic and religious, have from these simple strivings of dissatisfaction managed to create a world picture which is very hard to escape." [John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941), p. 72]

Hope is not a church's only important ingredient, but without hope, fear and anxiety drain church batteries of productive energy. An effective planning process provides hope for journeying into the future.

9. Planning helps keep Christ central. A hospital visitor saw these words on an inhalation therapist's tee shirt: "Breathing is life. Everything else is details." In churches, as in all other aspects of life, some matters are central; others are peripheral. When their people confuse central matters with peripherals, a congregation's magnetic pull and life-giving power decreases.

10. Planning drags our future into the present so we can influence its quality before it happens. Long-range thinking tends to improve our short-term decision-making.

We take the first step toward higher achievement in ministries when we concentrate on our most result-producing priorities. An effective planning process helps us to identify those priorities.

There is never enough time to do everything, but there is always enough time to do the essential things. An effective planning process helps us to identify those essentials.

The Bottom Line

One way to summarize the purpose of church planning is by quoting an American Indian proverb about the environment: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our grandchildren."

We do not merely inherit a congregation from our grandparents; we borrow it from our grandchildren. The big question: What strengths will our congregation have when we return to our grandchildren what we have borrowed? An effective planning process answers that question in a positive way.*

*From the "Free Resources" section of the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site, download two options for congregational planning—plus several dozen optional how-to church-effectiveness resources that committees and ministry teams can use to voyage with confidence into the future.

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