

A lever for change: Telling the congregation's story

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When pastors attend conferences, they often hear from leaders who work at large churches that exemplify the "best practices." The pastors and staff at these churches are usually gifted speakers who have a passion for ministry. Their cutting-edge ministries are well planned and involve large numbers of volunteers. Their worship services are dynamic and well executed. Their facilities are spacious, well designed and well maintained. The combination of outstanding passion, personnel and property can be exhilarating and leave listeners hopeful about what God can do in the church.

It can also leave them wondering why such fruitfulness is so difficult to cultivate in their own congregations. Why is it that the described principles and practices of ministry do not translate more easily to their own settings?

A clue to the source of this challenge emerges when talking to the members of those teaching churches. What is often revealed in these conversations is the significant convergence between the vision articulated by church leaders and the vision grasped by church members. These people are on a mission together, striving for common goals.

One reason for the synergistic alignment of visions is that in many cases the church is led by the founding pastor. In other cases, it is the pastor's compelling personal style that attracted most members to the church, so in effect this church has acquired under its current pastor the feel of a new congregation.

The problem for the rest of us is that most churches, especially mainline churches, are well established, often having more than 100 years of history. The pastors of these churches have inherited a culture and a set of expectations that can be traced through families, pastors and laypersons for generations. These congregations have a strong sense of tradition, a sense of "this is how we do things here."

The work of a church leader can be like the work of a supervisor in an apple orchard. Which would you rather do: be held accountable for the fruitfulness of trees that you selected and planted or be judged on the orchard that you inherited and that was established many years before you came on the scene?

Working in an established orchard has its advantages. Things have been started. The infrastructure is in place. The challenge is that the orchard has been managed by a long line of workers whose theories on tending the trees and whose goals for the orchard changed about every decade. A variety of trees were planted over the years and by now many have cross-pollinated—with some bad results. The orchard has some healthy trees but also some diseased trees and a few dead ones.

When a pastor or key leader in an established church suggests that there is a need for pruning, people in the congregation may suddenly feel that a modern John the Baptist has come to town saying, "Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9).

An essential prerequisite for fruitful leadership in established churches, then, is to learn the story of the congregation. God's vision will emerge partly out of that history. Leaders must be able to connect the new vision to past visions. They must draw from the historical story even as they discover and tell the story of God's new vision for the church.

Like an archaeologist, one has to discover the congregation's story. Like a social scientist, one has to analyze it. Like a theologian, one has to interpret it. Like a politician, one has to manage it.

When pastors spend time discovering the history, values and story of the congregation, they send a message that they are trying to join members on the journey that God has already been leading. Leaders must honor the long line of clergy and laity who have gone before and who have faithfully pursued God's calling. One builds credibility by honoring the calling of God that the church has fulfilled in the past.

In any church, some members are living in God's past and others are longing for God's future. Often those with the greatest attachment to the past are like large boulders in a river around which every decision affecting the church's future must flow. If many boulders are lodged against the stream, they form a dam that obstructs change.

The good news is that the congregation's own story and values can often act as a lever for change. People typically honor the history of their congregation and want to see the church be consistent with its heritage. Knowing the congregation's story, leaders can remind the congregation of the very best of its history and how these qualities can be lived out today. New members also benefit from hearing the story. It acts as a portal through which they step into community. The church's story of its past can become part of everyone who shares its values and who now seeks to embody those values in new ways.

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