

The folly of fear

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Last winter, when the church I serve was contemplating a new vision for organizing itself, especially its governance, I heard a certain question posed a number of times that asked whether or not other churches had tried such a system. How had it worked? How did people like it?

On a recent Saturday, I attended a feedback session for the draft document of the New Dimensions team of Maine Conference, United Church of Christ, that offers a new vision of governance and staffing for the conference. Again, I heard that question about how such a plan had worked elsewhere. What other conferences have tried the kind of model that is being proposed and how did it work?

It all sounds to me like we are buying a car. What is the safety rating? How will it hold up? How have other people liked it? How has it worked for them? Is it reliable?

It's one thing to ask for such data when buying a vehicle or an appliance, but why is it so important to us in the church? I'm reminded of that question my mother (and many other mothers) asked when I wanted to do something that all of my friends were doing, "If all of your friends wanted to jump off a cliff, would you want to join them?"

Why does it matter so much to church folk that we do something or try something new only because someone else has done it? Why does it matter that we use a tested model? Can we really find something that's similar to a Carfax for our churches, our associations, and our conferences? Maybe we should ask *Consumer Reports*.

Our fearfulness when it comes to engaging in something new is certainly a big part of our problem in the old mainline. At a fundamental level, it demonstrates a lack of connection to the Spirit as well as to our scriptures and the stories of our faith.

Did our ancestors in faith survey others before setting off for the new world? Did Martin Luther, Jan Hus, Ulrich Zwingli, or John Calvin ask about how new patterns for

faith and following worked among others before setting a new path?

We stifle the creative Spirit of God when we ask too many questions about how new models have worked out in other places. After all, it will always be different with a new cast of characters.

It's certainly useful and important to engage in deep and thorough dialogue about new possibilities and new patterns, and to connect with others who have tried new things, to learn from failures and triumphs. Yet we must never let our fear of the new get in the way of the new things that God is up to in our midst. We are not called to tread just the tried-and-true paths of others. We are called to walk the path that our Savior stretches before us, even when we are led to places that are completely outrageous, strange, and unfamiliar.

We are, supposedly, a people of good news. And there is good news. After all, our faith is grounded in an unspeakable death that actually revealed new life. Why is it so hard, then, for us to walk the new road, and to try that new thing? What are we so worried about?

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