

The tyranny of consensus

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A couple weeks ago I finished my pastorate in Vermont and moved to Exeter, New Hampshire, where I will be starting a new pastorate next week.

Last week we found that our new town doesn't have fireworks on the Fourth of July. The reason is not that these folks don't love their history. Exeter played an active part in the American Revolution and even has a museum dedicated to American independence here in town. Instead, the town chooses to honor their history by pushing their celebration from the fourth to a date later in the month, when in 1776 one of the first copies of the Declaration of Independence arrived in town and was read to the assembled crowds.

Here's how you might picture that event in your mind 238 years later: a guy in a three-cornered hat rides into town holding the Declaration. Someone else stands in the middle of a crowd and reads it. And then, because everyone loves freedom, there's a huge block party complete with fireworks and everyone is happy to be an American.

Except that's not how it happened.

At the festival here in town a re-enactor does read the Declaration to the crowd. But instead of being met with cheers and applause (though there are some of those), other re-enactors heckle him and decry the new document. The moment is recreated to be historically accurate: tense, full of conflict, and rooted in the assurance that everything was going to change for this town, this colony, and the 12 others who would somehow cobble together a new country.

As I think about what those first days and months must have been like for those who supported independence, I wonder whether it would be possible today. Would we

have the moral courage to forge ahead on a path that must have seemed so shaky? Could we make a decision so many seemed to deride? Would we proclaim it from the center of town? Or would we just slink silently away, not wanting to cause a stir?

You may think I'm talking about politics right now, but I'm thinking about the church. Because when it comes to doing something risky, and when it comes to moving ahead, even when some people aren't in agreement, the church is sometimes incredibly bad at it.

Have you ever heard church leaders say that they want consensus? Have you ever heard a pastor or deacon say they want a unanimous vote on some given matter like starting a new form of mission? Did they spend countless hours worrying about how to appeal to a few people who are vocal opposition, rather than working with the majority who are excited about moving forward? And were they scared to death that someone would be so unhappy that they would leave the church?

When I was in seminary, learning how to "seek consensus" seemed to be the most important skill a pastor could acquire. And it is important to promote unity in the church and to try to hear everyone's perspective. Sometimes, you'll even find that everyone is on the exact same page.

But, on the other hand, I've watched at a distance as churches have imploded because of their need for consensus. In one case it was because the vast majority of the church wanted to become open and affirming but a few members (including major donors) did not and threatened to leave. And so, because the church was not going to have a unanimous vote, the church made a "decision to make no decision" in an effort to keep everyone happy. Of course, no one was. And over the next few years more and more people left that church until a skeleton crew remained.

In another parish the congregation wanted to reach out to their neighborhood and address the growing addiction crisis in the community that surrounded it. A majority of members felt convicted that they were being called to this new ministry. But a minority felt it was "a waste of resources" and "a distraction". Even though there was more passion for this particular proposal than the parish had seen in some time, the idea was eventually dropped for fear that it would cause contention. To my knowledge, this parish has not engaged in any other form of mission in their community in the years since.

The reality of church leadership, like any kind of leadership, is this: you will rarely find that a good idea is received with unanimous approval. And, in those rare cases where you stand on the edge of something great, you might have more than just a handful of dissenters.

This is natural. Because it's easy to ask people to follow you into a place where there is no risk. Do that and you can get consensus every single time. But It's a lot harder to ask them to actually risk something, make a commitment, and try something new. And yet, a willingness to change is the only way for a parish to be resilient enough to survive.

A year ago I watched a pastor I respect lead her parish through a contentious decision-making process. The lines were drawn, a vocal minority sent letters to every stakeholder, and more than a few threatened to leave. But in the midst of all of this, that pastor didn't back away from showing leadership. She told her parishioners what she felt the church needed to do, backing it up with both sound theology and cold hard facts. And she joined them in conversation and prayers of discernment.

But when people came to her with threats of leaving or withdrawing support if the vote did not go their way, she did what too few pastors do: She said, in variations of these words, "I'm very sorry to hear that. You will be missed. But I hope you can respect that the majority of this church feels this is where God is calling us now." And she blessed them on their way. (It should be noted that very few actually left.)

Too often the church becomes a place where we don't want to alienate anyone. And so, we alienate everyone. We become conflict-averse to the point that we become stuck, so fearful of our own shadow that we can't move. And slowly we stop becoming a community of disciples, and we start becoming a museum of a faith community that once was.

There are enough of those already. And I don't think that's what Jesus was talking about when he called us to this risk-filled path called faith.

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