

Growth Points

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Thoughts on Churches as Organizations

Pastors love to say that the church is an organism rather than an organization. While this may be true on many levels, it is also true that organisms have organization.

Consider, for example, the human body. It is both a highly complex organism that is extremely organized. Churches are very similar,

All organizations, for example, have a group of members; a collective identity; a program of activity; a history; a method of recruitment and a way to place people into service or leadership; a set of rules, rituals, and routines; a folklore and special vocabulary.

All organizations experience crises from time to time. The leader who is constantly "putting out fires" is a poor leader, and ought to be replaced by someone who puts more attention into "fire prevention."

which is one reason why the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ is so popular.

Since the church is both an organism and an organization, we can learn much about leading and managing it from other human organizations.

Except for the very smallest churches, they are comprised of a number of sub-organizations of women, men, youth, and those with a variety of interests. This is the major difference between smaller and larger churches. Small churches are a single organization or cell,

Adjusting to Change

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All organizations face change. Some of the major changes churches face today are related to . . .

- Demographic Shifts

Changing rates of population growth, new immigration patterns, fluctuation of birth rates, etc.

- Social Values

These include new ways of relating to friends and family, changes between the sexes, fresh attitudes toward education, etc.

- Organizational Styles

Fashions, fads, creative methods of ministry, etc.

What types of changes is your church facing this year? What steps are you taking to adjust and adapt?

while larger churches are a gathering of multiple organizations or cells.

Organizations, of course, do not exist alone. Each must fit into and respond to changes in its context. Thus, they are required to change from time to time, and like any organism, organizations resist change. Like a human body going through an organ transplant, the church body tends to reject changes, even if the changes are for its good.

Change also occurs as an organization tries to improve. Long-range planning seeks to insure a constant cycle of improvement, but even good planning causes unexpected changes in other parts of the body. Of course, the basic change that all organizations go through is their growth and decline.

A similarity of all organizations is that they go through times of growth, stability, and decline. Generally, growing organizations are easier to lead and manage than stable or declining ones. Growth is usually viewed as a sign of success, which leads followers to trust their leaders more, which gives leaders more confidence. Both trust and

confidence often result in additional growth, so growth builds on itself, at least for a time.

Plateaued (stable) or declining organizations are the most difficult to lead and manage. Leadership mistakes are magnified, and decline or stagnation increases with each mistake. Thus, decision-making must be done more carefully.

Social organizations, like churches, usually reach a peak and then continue to operate for many years while declining in size. Like all organizations, churches find it difficult to find a balance between growth and decline. Thus, most churches are either expanding or declining at any given point in their history.

Since growth and decline are always taking place in organizations, leaders must take responsibility to guide changes as the organization adapts to its changing context and explores ways to improve. Leading an organization becomes more difficult as it grows larger. Consensus and communication of vision and direction is easier in smaller organizations. As church organizations get larger, the

people know each other less well, and find it more difficult to agree on direction, goals, or about anything. There is a breakdown of norms, and new procedures must be developed to cover routines that are no longer useful. Most difficult is the fact that some people become obsolete. Some of the original members, many of whom deserve the credit for its growth, are no longer able to adjust to the next level of growth.

Stable organizations are decidedly unstable over the long haul. They are especially susceptible to issues related to leadership succession. They must have major support of their members to keep from declining.

Declining organizations decline for a number of reasons, not all of which mean they are a failure. However, they are likely facing multiple problems that lead to a loss of confidence in its goals. The loss of confidence breeds further decline.

The problems of leading growing, plateaued, and declining organizations are not insurmountable. Studying other organizations can help pastors lead and manage a church well.