

Let's Close Half Our Churches

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Sound Radical? Perhaps. But perhaps it's time for radical surgery on the church in order to bring it to health and vitality, able effectively to carry out its mission of reconciliation. We have too many congregations doing their own thing, building their own buildings, paying their own overhead and offering their own programs to the community in competition with too many other congregations doing the same thing. If there was a day for church extension (and I'm sure there was) now is the time for church deletion. We are not here to see how many new Reformed congregations we can build. We are not here to preserve the identity of congregations, even though they have outlived their mission. We are not being called to maintain a church merely for the convenience of a few who refuse to make an adjustment in the pattern of their church life.

These are hard words, but we need hard words. Too long we have argued against change and new structures and modes of church life on the basis of sentiment, nostalgia, or obstinacy, cloaking our real feelings with pious arguments which no one dared to attack.

The day when we could afford that kind of luxury is past. We are not only failing to dent contemporary secular culture, we are not even keeping up with the exploding world population. The challenge of the day calls for radical streamlining of the Body of Christ. This will come to roost effectively by concentrating not on the multiplication of congregations, but on the re-grouping of the people of God into effective communities of worship, fellowship, and ministry.

What's involved? The willingness to die in order to live - a sound gospel principal (John 12:24-26). Jesus' words are addressed to individuals, but they are not without relevance to congregations as well. If it is really our primary aim to bring Christ to the nation, then we must be willing to put all else on the line.

The successful church will be the church that is a many-splendored thing – able to approach our culture from various angles with a wide variety of opportunities which will appeal to a wide spectrum of interests and needs. This can only be accomplished by a team ministry that offers specialization in several spheres.

In most areas the traditional pattern of congregational life which remained practically unchanged for over half a century is no longer effective in accomplishing the mission of the church. We can no longer take for granted the loyal, almost automatic response to the traditional church program. People will not necessarily be there just because there is a meeting.

Nor ought we attempt to coerce people through guilt or fear. The old loyalty to which once we could appeal and the family and community pressures which held a congregation together, whether or not there was a creative ministry that was meeting people at their point of need, can no longer be counted on and we ought not to regret that loss. We are now in a position to allow the winds of the Spirit to shape us into new forms of church life and ministry that will elicit the free response of people who make up our largely secular culture.

But the task is demanding and will require the special gifts and specialized training of the professional ministry, as well as the commitment of the total Christian community.

I believe the key to building successful churches lies in the development of a team ministry that can recruit, train, and motivate the Body of Christ to carry out its ministry in the world. Paul conceived of the pastor as one who equipped God's people for doing the work of ministry. The congregation can no longer be understood as the recipient of ministry carried out by a trained professional who becomes their private chaplain, but rather must be viewed as the instrument of ministry in the total cultural setting of which it is a part. This is not a new idea, but what is being demonstrated in various places throughout the church today is that effective recruitment and training issuing in effective ministry and church growth can take place more readily where there is a team of professionals that can utilize their specialized gifts for the building of the whole Body.

Team ministry offers several advantages over the single-pastor organization. First, it allows for the most efficient and effective use of the professionally trained ministry. Team ministry allows a person to exercise his best gifts in an area for which he is especially fitted. Many men with fine gifts and dedication flounder when they must carry the total program of a congregation's life and witness. When the leadership is frustrated, the whole program gets bogged down and everything is done with mediocrity. We cannot allow the Lord's work to be done with mediocrity. Let the one gifted in administration, administer; the one gifted in counseling, counsel; the one gifted in education, educate. Then each area of the church's life will receive the leadership of a specialist and the total program will have upon it the mark of excellence.

With a team ministry a wide spectrum of ministries can be inaugurated: small groups, singles' ministry, youth ministry, ministry to the aging, etc. There is a vast reservoir of willing volunteer labor in the church but it must be tapped, equipped and channeled into meaningful service. With a staff of trained professionals to administer, lay-participation increases.

With a multiplication of ministry comes the increased usage of facilities. Church buildings have traditionally been our poorest examples of Christian stewardship - large sanctuaries and beautiful educational units used very few hours per week. With a team ministry and a wide spectrum of ministries, the facilities will be in use seven days a week.

When a congregation can offer a wide-ranging program appealing to a wide spectrum of interests and meeting the needs of the whole person, it will grow, and as it grows it will be able to support a growing mission to its community and world.

Every congregation has a certain given overhead, but why should each little group of one hundred or two hundred families duplicate each other in building facilities, administrative costs and ministerial service? Why can we not fill the sanctuary three times on Sunday morning as well as once? What difference does it make if we develop two or three different congregations on the same locations? Instead of three costly buildings, there will be one. Instead of three ministers trying to do everything and succeeding with only some things, and doing nothing with excellence, could not three men join together, each doing well for the congregation what he is especially gifted to do.

And finally, the benefit of team ministry will be experienced in the mutual support the team members are able to give to each other. When one is alone trying to do too many things, succeeding in only some, and being frustrated in others, the ministry can become a very depressing business. But when there is a team working together, each one is released to exercise his best gifts, and finds in his colleagues support and affirmation which enables him to function more effectively and find fulfillment and satisfaction in his vocation.

Let us build the kingdom, not through the multiplication of congregations, but through the building of multi-staff congregations, which can then become effective communities of Christian worship and ministry.