

Ministry as Administrative Consciousness and Skills

We now begin the second half of the credo — a series of insights on how our beliefs as metaphysical Christians may play out in ministry. This section addresses ministry as administrative consciousness and skills. The following three sections will cover education, worship, and pastoral care.

You might think that administrative consciousness and skills means management. This section is not about management. Instead, it is about strategy.

In my opinion, Unity leaders' biggest mistake is formulating mission and vision statements with no clear strategy for achieving success. When attendance is low, or donations are down, Unity leaders will often adjust how they worship, what they teach, and who they pastor. But they are seldom aware that worship, education, and pastoral care are no more than offerings that implement a strategy. Without a clear strategy, leaders are left to repeatedly change these offerings by trial and error, hoping that suitable offerings will lead to a prosperous and effective ministry. The insights in this section provide a framework for formulating a better strategy.

The first two insights in this section will explain why and how a successful ministry can be effective and efficient in the eyes of congregants and other persons who follow and support the ministry. *Effective* ministries can accomplish what their mission and vision statements

claim they can do. *Efficient* ministries can do this using available resources.

Fortunately, we have excellent research about effectiveness and efficiency in organizations. What I will share goes beyond providing a list of qualities or a list of things to do. The research offers frameworks for compiling your own list based on your circumstances.

The third insight, *A Metaphysical Model for Ministry*, makes the case that while the congregational model of ministry is broken, metaphysical Christian ministries are equipped to deal with the broken model. What I have to say is based on my observations of ministerial burnout and the tendency for successful ministers in Unity to launch out on their own.

14. Rational Choice in the Religious Marketplace

This insight describes the factors that contribute to a ministry being effective. By effective, I mean being able to accomplish its mission and achieve its vision.

The most important characteristic of successful churches.

High levels of commitment — religious commitment — are the essential characteristic of successful churches. This insight explains how a ministry can be more effective by raising the level of religious commitment of its members. Further, commitment is essential for what is covered in the following insight, *Disruption in the Religious Marketplace*.

Most churches, especially Unity churches, are meticulous in writing out their mission and vision. The mission and vision are how we assess whether a ministry is successful. That's great.

But I seldom see a credible plan for what will change for the mission and vision to succeed. This insight summarizes sociological research of those factors contributing to the success and failure of churches. What I hope to convey, and what you should look to see, is how those factors drive religious commitment.

Rational choice in the religious marketplace.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist who has studied American religion and Christian history for over fifty years. He and his colleague Roger Finke have developed a theory of religion known as *Rational Choice Theory*, which says that people make their choices in religious matters in a rational manner.⁹⁸ Here are six conclusions that have come out of Rational Choice Theory (there are three more that are listed in the introduction to the section on *Ministry as Worship Consciousness and Skills*):

1. Humans are rational. They make choices and commitments based on explanations about how they can get their needs met, the cost of alternatives, and the social structures that regulate the exchange.
2. Explanations are beliefs about how life works. Explanations may be religious, magical, or scientific, but only religious explanations garner high levels of commitment. Magical and scientific explanations may arouse interest, but no one commits one's life to science or magic like they will to religious explanations.
3. Religions are systems of explanations of existence that include the supernatural (god or gods) and give the terms of exchange with a god or gods.
4. Exchanges with a god or gods are covenants, rituals, and other human behaviors that open channels for the supernatural cause of natural effects.
5. Religious organizations are social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and supply

⁹⁸ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. University of California Press, 2000.

religion to a set of individuals and to support and supervise the exchanges with a god or gods.

6. Religious commitment is the degree to which humans will meet the terms of exchange with a god or gods according to the explanations given by the organization.

These conclusions are disturbing to many people because they convey that the relationship human beings have with God or gods is motivated by self-interest; they are based on human beings making “rational choices” in how they order their religious life. It is a valid criticism.

However, these conclusions also provide a framework for understanding why people will support a ministry, regardless of their motivation. Removing religious motivation from the model allows us to see how religion may function in all human populations, including those who are not religious and not spiritual in temperament.

We should note that Rational Choice Theory does not rule out that some people who are steeped in religious temperament may make choices that are not in their self-interest. That’s fine. But all people, regardless of their motives, make choices based on what they rationally believe to be the outcomes. For this reason, conveying religious motives in terms of rational choices provides a basic understanding of how religion may function when making administrative decisions.

As the last point implies, people do not commit to a religious organization as much as they commit to a god or gods. And they do so according to how confident they are that their commitment to God will result in positive

outcomes. If a ministry wants a high level of commitment among its congregants, it must effectively convince people of what the ministry says about God in its teachings.

Religious commitment to God and confidence in God are based on human factors.

Here is the key to this insight: people’s confidence in God is based mainly on human factors. I have previously written about these human factors in *Why People Commit to Your Church*⁹⁹, and they are the basis for my workshop *Ten Affirmations for Healthy Congregations*¹⁰⁰. According to Stark and Finke (and as interpreted by me), religious confidence is strengthened by three human factors:

1. Confidence expressed by the spiritual leader. Confidence increases to the extent that paid ministers display commitment greater than that required of followers. Also, other things being equal, the credibility of unpaid ministers, such as Licensed Unity Teachers, is more effective in garnering confidence than paid ministers. If the ministry’s leadership seems ambivalent toward the ministry’s explanations, then so will everyone else.

2. Confidence expressed by the disciples. Confidence is strengthened to the extent that others express their faith in religious explanations. We make choices based on the

⁹⁹ *Why People Commit To Your Church*. <https://www.truthunity.net/the-human-side-of-unity/why-people-commit-to-your-church>

¹⁰⁰ *Ten Affirmations for Healthy Congregations*. <https://www.truthunity.net/courses/mark-hicks/ten-affirmations-for-healthy-congregations>

wisdom of others. We are seldom confident in anything that does not have community support. Testimonials are the primary means by which people communicate their confidence in religion. They are most effective when they come from a friend.¹⁰¹

It is not a stretch to see that this also applies to confidence displayed by other congregants. If no one seems to believe in what is taught, why would one have a reason to commit? Is God visible? Can we observe eternal life? The fact is that many of the benefits offered by ministries are not only intangible but also are never promised at any specific time in the future. So the confidence of others in the ministry's teachings is often the strongest reason people have to express their own confidence.

3. Trustworthiness of the organization. The stability of the religious organization also determines religious commitment and the investment people make in the organization. Religious commitment is a form of investment, and each of us has a limited amount to give. We have limited amounts of "time, money, and education" we can give to our spiritual development and community.

Why should someone invest in your church?

Think about how institutional instability can threaten our investment in a religious pathway and its organizations. Stark and Finke measure the degree of religious commitment in terms of what they call religious

¹⁰¹ *Confidence expressed by the disciples.* More about this is in Insight 19, *Good Disciples*.

and social capital. If someone is willing to learn the theology of the church and apply themselves to the practice, then they are said to have invested religious capital. If someone is willing to establish friendships with others in the ministry, they are said to have invested in social capital. Commitment is the sum of religious and social capital.

Congregants invest religious and social capital in a ministry just as they invest money in a bank. We hope that our bank is stable and trustworthy. Everyone pulls their money out of unstable banks.

As I will explain below, there are differences in stability between churches, sects, and cults. But let me first ask you to consider how people might respond when a group of uncommitted seekers overtakes an organization. My point is that churches need the discipline of religion, not spirituality, to avoid a decline in religious confidence and commitment.

Churches, sects, and cults.

Stark and Finke have spent a lifetime studying different expressions of religious organizations. They have developed a body of theory that explains how people in religious groups will operate based on their relationship to the culture in which they are found. Stark and Finke find that religious organizations fall into three categories: churches, sects, and cults.

1. *Churches.* From a sociological perspective, a *church* is a religious organization that reflects the norms of the culture from which it grew. Churches typically have

moderate levels of religious commitment (although many will join for secular benefits, and they suffer from the free-rider problem). As a result, churches are the safest place to invest religious and social capital.

2. *Sects*. A *sect* is a group that has broken from the established religious order and placed itself in some degree of tension with the accepted norms of society. This gives the group a distinct cultural identity and increases religious commitment. Christianity began as a Jewish sect. Methodism was an Anglican sect.

Many people are reluctant to join a sect because of what their family and friends might say (loss of social capital) or because of having to learn new religious explanations (loss of religious capital). But sects have the highest levels of commitment over time because they effectively deliver religious benefits.

3. *Cults*. Also from a sociological perspective (and not as commonly understood), a *cult* is a religious group entirely foreign to the established religious order. Christian missionaries are a cult in Asian countries. Buddhism, Yoga, and Transcendental Meditation could be considered cultic activities in American society.

Cults can be the most costly in terms of social and religious capital loss. Cults often have high levels of religious commitment, but high social costs limit them. That is to say that they can be effective, but they are generally not efficient. Alternatively, cults can become a novelty, like a horoscope — no more than interesting speculation with no commitment whatsoever.

Charles Fillmore's ambivalence about being a sect.

It is important to note that Charles Fillmore began by declaring Unity an educational movement “inaugurated by Jesus Christ.” He viewed Unity as a para-church organization, serving all Christian churches with prayer and healing services and religious materials that support the ministries of established churches. A para-church organization has no ordained ministers and is limited in the scope of its mission. Because of its limited scope, para-church organizations are a safe place for people to commit and a safe place for other churches to support.

But Charles eventually gave way to viewing Unity as a sect. Sometime in the 1920s, he wrote:

There can be but one reason for organizing a center or study class along Truth lines, and that is for a fuller expression of Christian principles than is ordinarily permitted in the regular church organizations...¹⁰²

A sect is a group of people, usually with a leader, who have separated themselves from some religious denomination because of differences of opinion, either in beliefs or in forms and ceremonies.¹⁰³

He also ordained ministers. This shows that Unity's co-founder went on record as declaring that Unity is a sect. This expanded Unity's mission and increased the

¹⁰² Unity School of Christianity, *Methods and Ideals for Conducting Centers and Study Classes*. <http://www.truthunity.net/methods-and-ideals/part-1-introduction>

¹⁰³ Unity School of Christianity, Correspondence Course, Lesson 4, *Body of Christ*. <http://www.truthunity.net/ucsl/series-1-lesson-4>

complexity of its relationships with other churches and its supporters.

Furthermore, Charles sent ambiguous signals via his eclectic study of eastern teachings. With some fairness, this has led many to declare that Unity was detached from the teachings of the Christian faith and, therefore, that Unity is a cult.

Unity is not a cult. A more appropriate term that may apply to some Unity churches would be “platform cult,” which Stark and Finke call organizations that bring in an eclectic variety of interesting speakers instead of promoting their own teachings. Some Unity churches seem to be a variety show of all things spiritual but not religious. And the content of the variety show in Unity churches can get pretty weird. I will return to this point in the Education section and the *Conclusion*.

Are you a church, a sect, or a cult?

Let me conclude this insight by stating that the most crucial task of the spiritual leader is to understand where the ministry fits in the church-sect-cult spectrum and to direct the group’s consciousness to that place. We have clear examples of all three types of ministries in Unity. And to some extent, they are all successful.

What is not successful is ambiguity. No one invests religious or social capital in organizations that are ambiguous about who they are. That is why I am so concerned about branding initiatives by the national organizations in Unity.

It’s okay for congregations to declare themselves churches, spiritual centers, or whatever, but it’s not okay for national organizations to impose a brand on independent ministries. That is why it will be challenging for Unity’s national organizations to establish branding initiatives that do not raise ambiguity.

In my judgment, we should declare Unity to be an authentic and distinct expression of the historic Christian faith, which is an unambiguous statement that Unity is a church.¹⁰⁴ I believe Unity is not a sect because metaphysical Christianity is on the same continuum as Evangelical Christianity, just at the opposite end. To a great extent, the purpose of this book is to lay out my justification for saying so.

¹⁰⁴ “an authentic and distinct expression of the historic Christian faith.” Thank you, Rev. Anna Shouse for helping to formulate the words of this phrase. I am grateful for our many breakfast meetings at Kerbey Lane Cafe in south Austin.