

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Leadership

Process Process Process

In real estate the mantra is *Location, Location, Location*. In church work, perhaps the most important motto is *Process, Process, Process*. A “process” is essentially the plan (steps or actions) by which a person or organization achieves a particular end. Oftentimes we get tripped up more by unclear process than by dissension over the actual issue at hand.

In the Exodus 37 and 38 Moses instructs the Hebrew people about the construction of a tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. He gives specific details as to whom God has inspired to do the designing, who will be included in the crafting, and why these projects are important. There are very clear directives about dimensions, materials, dedication rituals, etc. Talk about a thorough process! Can you imagine the silence when Moses asked, “Are there any questions?”

Whether we are proposing video technology or a wanting to launch a soup kitchen, whether the question at hand is about music in worship or an Open & Affirming study, congregations do best with a well-defined and carefully followed process. Ambiguity and evasiveness are recipes for disaster. Inconsistency and cloistered conversations will invariably raise suspicion and resentment.

Here are some strategies for healthy congregational life:

- **Consistency**—develop a process for decision making that the congregation learns to anticipate. Remind them this is how you typically approach such a question.
- **Clarity**—practice transparency when it comes to who has the authority to make a decision, the steps by which the decision will be made, and how the congregation will be informed along the way. It may be helpful to offer an anticipated timetable.
- **Communication**—it is crucial to lay out the approach before launching into issues. Talk about it in worship, but also write about it so the entire congregation has a chance to understand the plan and to value the integrity of the process.
- **Context**—set every important conversation within the context of God’s beloved people discerning together. Encourage prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- **Calm**—we can’t prevent angry parishioners from pitching a fit, but we can react with steadiness and with assurance that the process will allow all voices to be heard and will be fair. Clergy can often use good process as a way to slow down a potential runaway train. It gives us a structure in which to place all that energy and passion, and prevents hasty decision making and regret.

- **Consensus**—whenever possible make decisions by arriving at a general sense of agreement rather than pushing every decision to a vote (which creates a feeling of winners and losers rather than a spirit of unity).

The decisions we make in congregational life cannot all derive from consensus. There are times when a vote is necessary. Some will be pleased and others may be disappointed. Most important, however, is that we use a fair and open process. Some decisions can be made by the pastor, chairperson or a committee. Others require a vote of the leadership body (council or Consistory), and some—though not many—need to be made through a congregational vote. Sorting out the “level” at which a decision should be made is critically important and sometimes very challenging. It may be worth developing a policy or at least a general understanding of *who* decides *what*.

Name the process you intend to use, from the onset, and keep an accurate, written record along the way. Build in ample time for explanations, questions, study and prayer. Value all people throughout the process, and provide regular updates. In the end, some may not like the outcome, but they should never come away thinking the process was short-circuited or manipulated.

One last caveat—some congregations practice healthy process so well that they have a hard time actually making the decision. At some point you have to take the leap of faith!

Please share your thoughts and learnings on my [blog site](#).

Grace and peace,

Franz