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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Making Informed Decisions during Times of Change

Ann asked what seemed like a simple question: "We need more input and information before our committee can make a recommendation. How can we make sure that our decisions are wise and all voices are heard?" Congregations and regional bodies face this challenge when change or diminishing resources call for innovative approaches—such as new staffing configurations or shifting mission priorities. With many people involved—some with strong views and others with little interest or knowledge—how can leaders accurately portray the priorities of all those affected? One-on-one conversations about new policies are impractical in congregations. And when a regional governing body charges a task group with making proposals, the number of potential stakeholders grows even larger. In general, the larger the geography and the greater the number of stakeholders, the more complex the work becomes.

Where Do We Begin?

Obtaining accurate information means evaluating trends and reviewing resources (like budgets and revenues). Beyond that, the task group needs to hear a range of opinions and perspectives. However, some guiding principles for getting to the best-informed recommendation require the task group to answer some basic questions first.

What is our task? Without knowing the question, which serves as a kind of GPS system, the group is likely to find it impossible to arrive at their final destination. What is the need, problem, issue, question, challenge, or opportunity that prompted the formation of the task group in the first place? What purposes would be served by any recommendation the group might make? What do we hope to accomplish? What are our greatest hopes if the church or regional body acts on our recommendations?

What do we need to know (that we don't already know)? The group already knows more than they think they do. Begin by making a list of what the task group or committee already knows. Next, list what additional information would be ideal to know before making a grounded and well-informed proposal.

Who are the stakeholders? What individuals, groups, or organizations will be affected by our recommendations? If possible, list these in order, starting with those most affected and ending with those least likely to be affected (those parties least likely to notice or care). Stakeholders vary in their experiences with the congregation or regional body and in their level of knowledge and commitment. Thus, summing up all perspectives requires different kinds of data gathering strategies.

How do we discover our core values? Organizations—whether governing bodies or congregations—always act on their core values, not on their mission statements. Core values are those beliefs and convictions that determine the actions of the majority of leaders and members. A review of the recent past reveals the way core values operate in a regional body or congregation:

- What ministries are funded and where do members give time and energy?
- What programs and activities receive the most support?
- What assumptions or goals direct policies and planning decisions?

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Although core values are partially invisible to members and leaders, they powerfully frame perceptions. Stemming from theology, past experiences, and current context, core values determine what we do and how we do it. Effective data gathering tools uncover actual core values and prevent preferred core values—what people think *ought* to be or *should* be—from creating circular arguments and meaningless proposals.

What Way(s) Should We Gather Information?

Once the basic questions above have been answered, the group needs to determine which information gathering process(es) will build the most support for any final recommendation or action. At the end of the process, all stakeholders should perceive that they had the chance to contribute their views. It is fine if some constituents lack the interest to participate in any process as long as *they* make the decision not to participate rather than concluding that they never had the opportunity.

Most groups decide that they need more than one approach. Just as any building or renovation project calls for multiple tools—saws, hammers, nails, power or hand-held tools—groups need the same multiple-device tactic to investigate the best plan for organizational renovation or change.

Statistics and Trends. One category of information gathering uses numbers, charts, and figures to describe people, budgets, programs, or congregations. These methods are especially effective for illustrating the current state of things and to quantify change. Congregations or regional bodies should track some telling ten-year trends. For example: the number of congregations and total membership; average number of members per congregation; the total and per church number of baptisms and new members; average tenure of pastors; number of churches served by a full-time pastor; overall budget for the regional body; average contribution per worshiper; percentage of budget for staff, programs, or other expenses; programs and average number of participants; and number and kinds of people active in leadership roles.

Surveys. Questionnaires can be mailed, distributed during worship services, given out at meetings (such as church boards, regional meetings, or events), or set up online. (Beware: Although online surveys are inexpensive, they tend to yield very low response rates.) Survey questions can either be close-ended, where all the responses are provided (for example, a statement followed by "Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?") or open-ended, where the person answering the survey gives a written response. For example, "What are some of the best things you see happening in your congregation right now?"

One example of an in-worship survey designed to help congregations discover their core values is on this website: www.TheParishPaper.com/free-resources. Another easy-to-use worship survey reveals a church's current strengths and ways to build on those strengths (at www.USCongregations.org/survey).

Interviews. Other methods bring balance to the picture painted by numbers and figures. Capturing stories or recounting experiences make up the essence of this avenue. For example, regional bodies can conduct short phone interviews with all (or a sample of) pastors, committee chairs, leaders in similar regions, or national denominational staff. In a congregational setting, consider doing ten-minute phone interviews with Sunday school teachers, committee members, or other sets of members.

*Focus groups. S*tructured group interviews give additional rich insights if the task group identifies small affinity groups (such as pastors who serve in small churches, pastors new to the region, or recently ordained pastors). Carefully designed questions, prepared in advance, generate good insights. For example: "Tell us about an occasion in the past year when you had contact with a regional staff member. What brought you together and what was an outcome of that contact? What's an important challenge that your congregation faces? How has the regional staff helped you tackle that challenge?"

In a congregational setting, focus groups prove effective with similar individuals such as new members, young mothers, or retired members.

Final Destination:
A Successful Recommendation

After compiling what they've learned, the task group draws on this knowledge to make an informed proposal. Good decision-making procedures include obtaining input from all stakeholders, permitting all opinions to be discussed in a respectful and open way, allowing the appropriate committees and ministries to reflect on proposals and offer feedback, and constructing a plan to evaluate the recommendation's effectiveness in the future.