

MISSIONAL INITIATIVES

Monthly Newsletter

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Article, Story and Resource contributed by Merv Budd

ARTICLE

The Tail that Wags the Dog

We've all heard the expression "the tail is wagging the dog." In an organization it implies that something secondary, that should be responding to the primary thing, has taken over and now controls in a way that has displaced what is primary. This kind of situation can arise suddenly, but more often there is a slow drift from the primary mission.

Churches can easily find themselves in situations like this. Many churches started off intentionally – evangelistically engaged and missionally focused. As church plants they needed to be in order to survive. But once the church grew to a comfortable level, once there were so many people that needed to become connected, it just seemed to make sense to pull back a bit on reaching out and focus more on assimilating and fellowship. "After all," we rationalized, "isn't fellowship one of the purposes of the church?"

It seemed to make sense at the time, but that inward pull of fellowship soon becomes the tail wagging the dog. It isn't long before people who are not part of the fellowship get the clear impression that they are outsiders who are intruding. And the fellowship of the church, which is meant to serve the mission by drawing people in, now begins to repel. Fellowship is meant to serve more like a rest stop along the highway. A place where we fuel and rest, but only so we can be refreshed for the journey ahead, as we continue to engage in the mission of God.

Fellowship can soon become an end in itself and much of the calendar is filled with "fellowship events" which compete for the limited time that believers might have to be with and among their community and neighbours.

To equip a congregation evangelistically requires that the purpose of fellowship is clearly presented as serving the mission. This does not necessarily mean an end to fellowship; it simply requires a reorientation. Extend the invitation of fellowship to take place in gathering

places and activities outside the church building. Join community book clubs and bowling leagues with other followers so that the warmth of your fellowship is turned outward. Extend the use of your building to community organizations and encourage your people to participate.

The truth is that the foundation of fellowship is not potlucks and game nights. The Spirit of God leads us out into the world together. The strongest bonds of fellowship are forged as we serve side by side in the mission. Fellowship is indeed a purpose of the church, but its purpose is to serve the mission. When the desire for fellowship has weakened the mission, it is not the kind of fellowship God had in mind.

STORY

I couldn't understand why those whom I recruited to volunteer with the property committee kept saying "no" when they were asked. The property committee at the historic downtown church where I served was aging. The now-senior men – many of whom were in their eighties – who had cared for the property were some of the only people who understood aspects of its running and maintenance. The information they carried was not written down and was at risk of being lost with the aging men who knew it.

They were looking for younger volunteers to whom they could pass on their knowledge, share the renovation and maintenance history of the church, and pass on the baton of building stewardship. They complained to me, "The young people just aren't committed and don't want to join the building committee." I couldn't understand why. When I spoke to the younger men, many of whom were excited and well qualified to be on the committee, they told me they would love to be part of the committee. But when I passed their names on to the committee to invite them, they all refused.

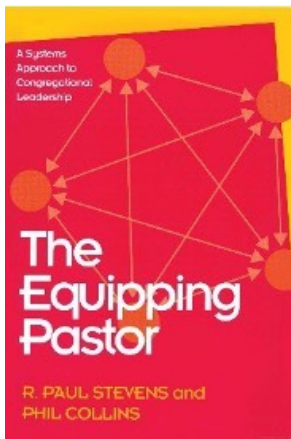
I finally came to understand what was happening. The building committee had invited the younger men to their meetings, and the younger men were enthusiastic, but the problem was that the building committee met at 2:00 p.m. on a weekday afternoon. Nobody with a regular job was able to attend. When I approached the committee to recommend a change in time, they objected, "We've always met at that time. The young people just aren't committed."

Systems theory proposes that members of a system are interdependent. But a broken system can restrict the health of an organization. This story illustrates where a system was broken. Of course, it was an obvious and easy fix once it was identified. The problem is that when you are in the system it is not always easy to see the issues that are hindering it.

When a church system is not functioning well, when it is competing rather than cooperating, it can grind the whole mission to a halt. To effectively equip a church evangelistically (or any other way) it requires more than simply teaching individuals or creating separate sub-committees. The whole system needs to work together. This takes more than a mission statement posted on a wall. When churches are engaging in an evangelistic health audit, part of that process requires careful consideration of the church system as a whole.

RESOURCE

***The Equipping Pastor* by Stevens and Collins**



If systems theory is new to you, or if you've never thought about how it applies to the local church, I would recommend *The Equipping Pastor* by R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins. While it was written in 1993, it is an excellent "go to" resource in understanding how to equip a congregation systemically. It is specifically written with the pastor in mind and, while its ecclesiology may not reflect all congregations, the teaching is easily transferable to our present context.

Contact Us

Cam Roxburgh | VP Missional Initiatives: croxburgh@nabconf.org
Sara-May Cardy | Director of Administration, MI: scardy@nabconf.org