

Organizing to be Mission Focused and Permission Giving

by Pastor Louis R. Forney

Christians are good at meetings. We meet together often. We talk church well. We spend so much of our energy taking care of business; we sometimes neglect ministry. At times, we even mistake maintenance of the church for ministry. A common expression of this "maintenance trap" appears when the congregational council thinks it is their job to run the business, the pastor's job is to do the ministry and the people's job is to be cared for by the pastor. Biblical evidence paints a different picture. Ephesians 4:12 says the pastor's role is to equip the people of God and the people are called to do the work of ministry. It doesn't say much at all about what the congregational council is supposed to do.

About three years ago, our congregation decided to stop holding meetings and start doing ministry. We began a journey to become mission focused and permission giving. Here are the main areas of change on that journey:

State your mission

Many congregations already have a mission statement. Ours was somewhere in the constitution. Not one leader could quote it. How could we focus on our mission if we didn't know what it was? We reworked our mission statement so that anyone could remember it: Welcome people in, help them grow, send them out to care. Welcome - Grow- Care. If your congregation adopts a mission statement, remember to keep it simple.

Teach your mission

The next step for us was to teach our mission to everyone in the congregation. Worship bulletins, banners, newsletters, sermons, Bible studies, name tags, bulletin boards, children's messages, and responsive readings help teach the mission. Redundancy is the key. If you want your congregation to know the mission, then talk about it, make decisions based on it, and make it visible in every form of communication. As new ministries emerge, interpret them in light of the mission statement.

Structure for mission

In order to structure for mission, not maintenance, we reorganized our governing structure around our mission statement. We designed three core teams around the mission statement: Welcome, Grow, Care. Each core team leader oversees the work of dozens of ministry teams. For example, under the "Welcome" area of mission are the following ministry teams: senior choir, children's choir, direct mail team, parking lot greeters, worship visitor follow-up callers, new residents mailing team, and the "Blitz" team (canvasses 1,000 homes closest to the church building several times a year with flyers). The ministry teams under the "Grow" core team include new mom support ministry, parents of pre-schoolers, adult education, small groups, confirmation, first

communion and Sunday school. The "Care" ministry teams are groups such as the hospital callers, tele-care callers, a parish health care ministry, support groups, recovery groups, adopt-a-highway workers, a battered women's shelter support team, the Red Cross blood drive servers, and a group organizing foster care for Lutheran Social Services. Each ministry team is given responsibility for a small piece of the bigger picture of the congregation's total ministry!

We maintain a clear line between governance and ministry. The congregational council takes care of the business side. The primary function of the council is to provide strategic planning and see that the congregation's ministry is consistent with the mission. The council serves in a support role, making sure the ministry teams have adequate financing, trained leadership, and other things needed to do ministry. The congregational council and ministry teams relay information and focus on accountability rather than control. Ministry teams are empowered to do their jobs. There are even several ministry teams connected directly to the congregational council: finance, facilities, policy, new ministry development, and existing ministry review team. In addition, the pastor is a part of a leadership development team focused on equipping and supporting lay leaders of ministry teams and staff!

Relinquish control

We faced a turning point when we began to address control issues. Who was in charge? The pastor? The congregational council? The loudest complainer? In many traditional congregational structures, multiple levels of decision making exist to kill good ideas. Power and control issues or highly structured decision-making processes sometimes get in the way of new ministry initiatives. People in this country often think that the church is a democracy and we need to ask the members what they want. The majority rules. It's not biblical. Unhealthy and sometimes subtle control-related issues dominate church life all too often. We became convinced that if we understood the Holy Spirit to be present in the life of God's people, we needed to trust those people.

Permission giving

After articulating our mission and restructuring for ministry, we took the next step. Since God is in charge, we decided to let people carry out the work God has given to us. The mission of the congregation became the direction of our ministry. We stopped discussing everything everywhere, and just did ministry. Since that time, self-starting and self-directing ministry teams have grown up everywhere. They are encouraged to see and meet needs. If something is consistent with our mission, it happens. No one stops ministry from moving forward! Responsibility for ministry rests in the hands of the people of God - where it belongs. In some ways, the church has turned upside-down. Leaders teach people the mission and equip them to do ministry. We give people what they need to do what they are here to do.

Spiritual gifts

Following a sermon series on spiritual gifts, we encouraged every member to complete a spiritual gift assessment tool. We compiled a booklet with every existing ministry opportunity listed. As new members join, they discover their gifts and how they

can use those gifts in ministry within and beyond the congregation. Every member is expected to serve in an existing ministry or help develop a new ministry. We've even developed a ministry to help others start new ministries! As we trust and empower people, our ministry has exploded. It has been a long journey, but we now have over 90% of our members actively serving in over 100 ministries. We are now mission focused and permission giving. It works!