



Do we need to plan?

“We need a vision!” How often have we heard this comment at a board meeting, bursting out from a pent up sense of frustration. The speaker is likely articulating what many others are feeling. A lack of direction, lots of activity but no common purpose, burnt out volunteers and no one new to take their place, relationships and ministries which have reached an impasse are just a few of the symptoms which give rise to remarks like this.

Perhaps the comment comes from a sense of opportunity. A new minister has been in place for a year or so and people feel it's time to work together on a common purpose. There is demographic growth in the neighbourhood and there is the possibility for attracting newcomers. Or maybe several neighbouring congregations feel they could be much more effective as a larger, amalgamated congregation.

How do you talk about change and planning in a way that allows people to explore possibilities and not jump to premature conclusions? Here is a process to help.

Where are we? What is our current situation?

Make up a sheet with about 12 traffic signs from your computer menu. (Stop, curve ahead, under construction, pedestrian crossing, green light ... etc.) Ask each person to choose a traffic sign which he or she thinks says something about the current situation of the congregation. Each person in turn, without comment or debate, shares the sign they have chosen and why they chose it. A facilitator notes the key points on a flipchart. The facilitator notes convergencies and differences (or asks the group to note these). He or she summarizes with the question, “What are we saying about where we are as a congregation?” Further evaluative questions are “Is our self portrait true or is it clouded by nostalgia and a narrow perspective?” and “Is our sense of context accurate or are we making assumptions without research?”

Exploring further

You will probably have enough information from this exercise to move forward. However there may be issues that you need to explore further which these questions can help identify.

- Do members of your congregation feel they can take creative initiatives or do they feel victimized by changes happening to them? (for clues, note the language and symbols people are using to describe their sense of the current situation)
- What can you talk about freely in your congregation and what can't you?
- How widely is the need for new vision, mission and direction shared within your congregation? Is it pervasive? Is it being blocked?

- How would you characterize the change you are seeking in your congregation – as a fire, or as a pendulum (ie changing course or making adjustments)? How can you tell?
- What are the experiences board members have with other planning processes? What would you affirm? What would you want to avoid? What are the values you would want in a planning process for your congregation? What are the spiritual outcomes you would look for in a planning process?
- What are the potential benefits from engaging outside consultants in a planning process? What are the potential disadvantages? What are the possible consequences of leading a change process with volunteers from within the congregation?
- What would you look for or expect from outside consultants, paid or volunteer?
- If you were to engage outside consultants, how would you pay for them? How would you make the case for spending money on planning to your congregation?

Some of the reasons for bringing in outside consultants include:

- a feeling of impasse and being stuck
- the need for neutrality and skills in making difficult conversations happen
- the need for significant change that will “stick”

Do any of these reasons apply to your congregation?

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