

Chapter 11

Understanding the Dynamics of a Smaller Church

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No two churches are exactly the same. Location, leadership, history, heritage, role in the community, congregational diversity, cultural setting, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the will of God for the congregation--all of these help form the character of a congregation.

In recent years social scientists--sociologists, psychologists, and historians--have studied carefully the dynamics of local churches. They have gathered valuable and useful insights relative to the energies, resources, needs, and forces that activate congregations. This chapter summarizes these findings and gives suggestions for using this information to understand congregational life better where you serve.

This is a valuable exercise for any pastor. The most effective leaders know who they are, where they are, and who they are leading. This process is imperative for the field-of-churches pastor. Often churches yoked together are very different from each other. To preach the same sermons, promote the same programs in the same way, employ the same leadership style, and provide the same kind of pastoral care may mean to court disaster.

Superman used to find a phone booth where he could change clothes as he moved from one role to another. As one effective pastor of two congregations explained his life, "I am no Superman, but my role in each church is different, and I must change my way of leading as I move back and forth between the fields."

People Dynamics (*As seen through relationships between a typical family and a small church*)

Glenn and Mary, in their early forties with two teenage children, move into the Forks of the Creek Baptist Church community. The family is converted and unites with the church. Identify the dynamics at work within family members as they relate to the Forks of the Creek congregation.

An obvious factor is the *spiritual enthusiasm* they are experiencing as a result of their conversion. As spiritual newborns, they experience spiritual hunger and need nourishment, exercise, and training.

They bring their *resources*--money, skills, gifts, talents, and friendships--formed outside the congregation. Each of these can be used or developed to enrich church life.

Each person of this family has the physical and emotional needs common to an individual age group, social/cultural background, and economic class. Glenn, Mary, and the children expect the church and its members to meet some of their needs.

They bring their *expectations* about churches. They are looking for certain kinds of people, behaviors, and events that they believe characterize churches.

They bring a set of values, a perspective, or *world view*, learned in society. It likely contains some elements that conflict with views held by the more spiritually mature members of Forks of the Creek. While salvation is instantaneous, reprogramming to live the Christian lifestyle must involve long-term development.

They bring some desires or *wishes* common to humankind--for security, new experience, recognition, and response. A related listing includes comfort, identity, power, and meaning. Central to these desires are the warm fuzzies one can receive from associations with others. If these desires are not met in the church, Glenn and Mary will probably look elsewhere.

They have learned the *principle of reciprocity* that governs interpersonal relationships in our society. Simply, it means that if someone does a good turn, the recipient is obligated to return it in kind. (Unfortunately, there is also a "negative" corollary.) Consequently, they will evaluate their experience in the church in terms of what they perceive as costs and benefits. If they become and remain active in Forks of the Creek, it will be because they see the

benefits outweighing the costs.

Each brings his or her *scripts* and *styles*. Each person has a variety of social roles and has learned to play those roles in a unique way. Some common styles have been identified as those of cheerleader, draft horse, thinker, and joker. (Incidentally, it seems that each of these roles must be performed in a group like a church. Who takes these roles in your church?)

Sociologists have identified four *basic modes of interaction*--competition, conflict, cooperation, and consensus. Like many of us, Glenn and Mary may have allowed one of these modes to become typical of their interactions with others. (If a person is typically a conflict interactionist, he or she may not fit well in a church where consensus is important.)

Finally, each one brings his or her *autobiography*. Included are the joys and agonies of his or her life. Held together by the thread of memory, they comprise his or her sense of self. This affects the way he or she perceives and responds to events in church life.

These 10 dynamics should be considered as pastors and congregations work to foster spiritual growth. Human relationships make church work both exciting and difficult. People are not lumps of clay to be fashioned by a church leader. They are dynamic folk with needs, drives, resources, and motives that must be acknowledged in the process of spiritual growth, congregational assimilation and mission enterprise. Further, when so much energy is brought together from so many different sources, at least some minor explosions should occur, and be expected.

Group Dynamics

Glenn, Mary, and their children are four individuals who relate to 50 other people in Forks of the Creek church. Each member of the congregation is characterized by this set of 10 dynamics. Large segments of our living are in relationship with groups of people. Group relationships meet many of our needs and enhance our power. In fact, many personal goals can be realized only in concert with others. But groups are more than mere extensions of the people who form them. Groups can generate their own unique goals and coordinate their resources to achieve these goals.

The *mixing* of people in a group, as with mixing chemicals, creates new powers that are greater than the sum of their parts. This is certainly true in the case of a church. Often a group will become a quasi-person with an existence of its own. The very presence of other people can motivate one to levels of effort he or she had not dreamed possible.

Groups set and seek to attain *goals*. This process gives the group a sense of direction and purpose. Major goals of the church have been identified as worship, witness, education, fellowship, mission support, intercessory prayer, ministry, and moral/prophetic leaven for the community. The church designs programs and projects and constructs facilities to assist in goal achievement. It trains members and fosters their spiritual growth so that they may carry out these tasks in their everyday lives.

The church *adapts* to its environment. It condemns the sins most prevalent in its age and place, translates the gospel into the idiom of the age, employs the media, and seeks to influence the structure and practice of other institutions. Small churches may mirror the surrounding culture. They may accommodate it selectively, or they may reject it, either by withdrawing from or actively seeking to change the culture. Consider how you and your church have done all of these.

The successful group organizes to achieve its *goals*. Normally this means to survey resources, consider possible courses of action, choose one, assign tasks, coordinate efforts, and motivate members to expend the required effort. Baptist churches have been successful in doing these things. Employing Paul's example, the body--or organizations--of the local church must work in harmony to achieve group goals. When they fail to do so, the body suffers disease that may prove disabling, if not fatal.

Most groups are only as effective as their *leaders*. This is the reason for careful leader selection and training. Ideally, Baptist church leaders are people who personally feel called out and empowered by God's Spirit for their specific tasks. This calling is affirmed by their election by the congregation.

Not all leaders have the same style. Some are builders, others are stabilizers; some are bulldozers, others are gardeners. This can be good. Different groups need different types of leaders. And any one group needs different leadership styles at different points in its life. Ideally the style of the leader should be matched to the needs of the church.

Groups develop *patterns for making decisions*. Sociologists have identified three decision-pattern types. In one, *accommodation*, group members suppress their desires and follow the will of a strong leader. In another, *de facto*, the group fears making a decision that might anger a part of the group and delays decision making until opportunity to act has passed. Most groups in America seem to subscribe to *consensus* because, when all members can have a voice, everyone can accept the decision. In our church polity, Baptists seem to have pioneered and continue to employ the consensus model.

Groups normally develop means of *conflict resolution*. Sometimes consensus cannot be reached. Other times members disrupt the group by bringing in differences that have occurred outside the group. Sometimes personality clashes occur among members.

Our Lord anticipated this problem in the life of the church and provided a model for conflict resolution (see Matt. 18:15-17). Certainly one of the negative dynamics in some churches is the failure to resolve conflicts. A most important factor in resolving conflicts is communication, as Jesus taught, between those who have differences. Differences should be discussed within the frame of the awareness of the overriding importance of the task of the church. Differences must not deflect the church from its goals, and therefore the parties must honestly seek to resolve them.

Selection and socialization of new members are vitally important to a group. Without new members, a group will lack the vitality of new ideas and ultimately die. Normally, people unite with groups in which they feel comfortable and accepted. They look for a group that can further their personal goals. Though a church declares that all people are welcome, the personality of the group will be attractive to some and not others.

Further, most groups design a methodology by which they initiate new members into their practices, beliefs, traditions, values, and interests. For Glenn and Mary to be effective members of the Forks of the Creek Church, they should know about the history of the church, its organization, goals, beliefs, activities, needs, and resources.

The socialization process should *bond* Glenn and Mary to the church. Sociologists have discerned three categories of bonds. By deciding to unite with Forks of the Creek, Glenn and Mary formed *identity* bonds with it. As they become active in the life of the church and take teaching assignments, leadership responsibilities, and other roles, they form *task* bonds. As they join with other members to achieve goals and set future objectives for the church, they develop what are called *crescive* bonds. The axiom applies that, the greater the number of bonds a person has with a group, the more he or she is tied to it and the less likely he or she is to withdraw from it. Consequently, the wise group leader seeks to bond the members to the group. This is why consensus decision making, which encourages membership involvement and commitment, is so important.

Our Lord told us that whosoever would lose his life for the sake of Jesus would find it (see Matt. 10:39). What is His sake? It is the *kingdom* which He preached. The church He established makes the kingdom visible. The effective church member is a team player. He is willing to sacrifice fulfillment of personal needs for the well-being of the group. When a group has members with this level of commitment, most likely it will succeed.

Life in a group can and should be exciting. When one is aware of the dynamic forces involved, organizing, and coordinating those forces can become a real adventure. This is particularly true for the pastor as he seeks to do God's will through the group.

The 10 points discussed in this section can be seen as basic needs, forces, drives, or motives--the dynamics of group life--that affect its being. A group tends to take on a character or personality that makes it recognizable in the community. This is termed a group's institutional existence.

Institutional Dynamics

Four or five additional qualities are unique to this level. A group becomes institutionalized when it acquires *material resources*-- buildings, budget, tools of its trade. These resources make the work of the group more visible to nonmembers.

Reputation is a mark of an institutionalized group. A group's reputation is what it is perceived as doing in the community--good or bad. Its reputation is also affected by the resources it controls. Once a congregation gets a bad reputation, overcoming it is difficult. A church fight, sexual misconduct by leaders, or financial fraud can be a millstone around the neck of the group.

A small church develops its own *culture*. It includes elements of the group dynamics discussed above, the local and national culture, and the denominational culture. Sociologists define culture as a set or configuration of beliefs, values, norms, language, material things, and behavior patterns that are normative for a distinct and distinguishable people.

For example, all of a church's visible, material resources reflect its culture--external style of architecture, arrangement of church worship area, Sunday School space, placement of pulpit, types of musical instruments, and choice of hymnbooks.

Church culture also includes rhythm. At what time of year do annual events occur--revivals, homecomings, special Bible studies, Vacation Bible School? Even nonliturgical congregations have worship time rituals--greeting visitors, altar calls, stylized prayer lines, and orders of service.

We also have our rules of normative behavior. Consider the expectations for members' conduct--participating in the church program and activities and refraining from vices.

A church has its language of Zion--the words and phrases that are part of the special language of the church.

Finally a church has its stories. This is the oral history of the great, the tragic, and the funny events that comprise the congregation's life. Glenn and Mary must learn the stories and identify with them as well as with other cultural elements of the congregation.

An example of this is found in an urban Southern Baptist congregation in Minnesota. The congregation borrowed an art form from Lutherans--the dominant denomination in the region--and hung auditorium banners depicting biblical events. The cultural aspect probably makes it easier for the convert from the region to come into the fellowship of a Southern Baptist church.

Interinstitutional *relations* are also important. Any institution must relate to other institutions in some way--cooperation, competition, or conflict. A church relates to other churches, schools, businesses, factories, government, recreation facilities, and many other community institutions. The church affects and is affected by all of these. The church also relates to similar institutions outside the immediate community. Things done at county, city, state, national, and global levels have direct and indirect impact on the life of the local church. A church individually, or in concert with other congregations, may influence what happens at these broader levels.

Size is another important dynamic. Sociologists note that as a group adds members arithmetically, possible relationships grow geometrically. Relationships among people in the congregation are different at each level of growth. For example, a fellowship of 30 likely will have more intense relationships than a small church of 80.

Glenn and Mary were attracted to Forks of the Creek because it had a reputation for being a caring church. They knew members of the congregation in other roles in the community and liked them. Their children liked the youth of the church. The church seemed to have a good program staffed by trained leaders. The building was neat, clean, and maintained.

Glenn and Mary had visited another church in the area. They did not respond positively to that church because of their observations. They heard that the church did not keep a pastor long. Two of the families seemed to be vying to run the church. Most of the people seemed complacent. The building was cold and messy.

Glenn and Mary had also considered attending First Church, County Seat. The building was beautiful. But Glenn had had bad business experiences with some church members. And the congregation had a reputation of being rather socialite and clannish. Fortunately, they found Forks of the Creek, a congregation that met their needs and expectations.

Environmental Dynamics

Every institution operates in a physical, social, and cultural environment. A rural Appalachian church field will be long and narrow because it is much easier to travel up and down valleys than across ridges. It is likely that the congregation will have customs unique to mountain churches--gospel music, collection after the message, singsong delivery of the message, altar calls, and prayers. Many rural churches are comprised largely of old people because this is the character of the community. The list of illustrations might be greatly expanded, but the point is obvious.

People who have visited many different congregations note similarity and diversity of churches. In many ways, Southern Baptist churches are alike. They all meet the same set of basic needs; they are all driven by the same dynamics. Yet the dynamic mix and the environment ensures that each is unique.

There is no ideal church. The range of needs, experiences, and talents people bring to a church cannot be met and used by any single organizational form. Environments and resources vary greatly. Within each congregation is a place for diversity.

Baptists have great strength in diversity, with varying socioeconomic, educational, and worship-form levels, as well as widening cultural and ethnic variety. Any congregation must adapt itself to the dynamics of people, groups, institutions, and environment. To do less is to limit the group to minimum effectiveness.

Consider Glenn and Mary's experiences at the Forks of the Creek church and the whole discussion of church dynamics. Determine actions that can assist your ministry.

In summary:

1. See needs of people.
2. Harness resources.
3. Set a goal(s).
4. Organize to achieve the goal(s).
5. Coordinate activities to point toward the goal.
6. Relate to the environment--physical and sociocultural.
7. Provide appropriate leadership.
8. Deal with conflict.
9. Integrate new members socially and build bonds.
10. Help people see that the needs of the group will sometimes take precedence over personal needs.

Application

The following steps will help you formalize and expand the process of understanding and applying the principles of interpersonal dynamics in a small church:

1..... List the people (families) who have come into the fellowship of your church over the past two or three years. Consider each in terms of the 10 people dynamics identified in this article. How was the church effective in responding to these forces? How did it fail? What other actions might be followed related to this set of dynamics?

2..... List people who have withdrawn from the church either by transfer of membership or by inactivity. Indicate apparent reasons. Do the reasons reflect the people or the group dynamics discussed in this article? What corrective measures might be taken?

3..... List people who, after visiting the church, chose to unite elsewhere. What dynamics affecting this choice can you identify? What steps might be taken to address this matter?

4..... Are congregational goals clear, well articulated, and widely accepted? Are successful efforts made to foster teamwork within the church? Does the church make intentional efforts to bond new members to the fellowship? Detail how this is done.

5..... What is your church's reputation? To get a reading, ask neighboring pastors or the director of missions for an assessment.

6..... List your church's rhythms, rituals, and rules. A complete list is not possible. Yet the process will demonstrate that the culture of your church is much more highly defined than you may have imagined.

7.As you visit with people in the congregation, take note of the several stories that reveal its life. Small churches in small, compact, old communities contain many wonderful stories. Make note of some you have heard. How have you used them for understanding or for illustrating spiritual truths and ministry?

8.Analyze your church's relationship to the institutions of the community. Is it like some rural churches, the only or the central institution? important? mostly ceremonial? at the fringe? scarcely known? alienated from the community?

9.How does your church relate to its several environments? Are there groups of people (frontiers) that are not reached by a church in your community? If so, what might your church do to reach them?

10..... The numerical size of a church influences how the congregation perceives itself and its function. What size is your church? How does this make it different from large congregations? Many pastors have struggled to move a congregation from one size category to another. How does this fit your experience?

11..... This raises the issue of leadership. Typically, the older, smaller congregation has a tradition of strong lay leadership. And typically, a part of its story is survival in the face of a crisis, through which good, evangelical, mission-minded leaders have emerged. Other times, it is status quo oriented. Learning how to work with status quo leaders is one of the most difficult lessons for ministers to learn. What are your church leaders like? Do you and they share a common set of goals, dreams, and methodologies? If not, what can be done to bring consensus? What are the leadership training needs of the church? What is your leadership style? How does it mesh with indigenous leadership and the needs of the church?

Complete this process for each of the churches you serve. Then compare and contrast the churches' characteristics. From this, formulate a strategy for your leadership of each congregation.

Conclusion

Shortly before the American Revolution, when Baptist faith was just beginning to take hold in America, Jonathan Edwards, in trying to grasp the dynamics of the new birth for the individual convert, said that it affected one's understanding, will, and emotions. Spiritual birth gives the convert a new perspective which should affect one's understanding of self, society, and the world. Things which formerly left one cold are now exciting and vice versa. And one's will is now directed toward new goals. This is the dynamic of the new birth. In various ways, this new dynamic of understanding, will, and emotions interplays with the more natural dynamics of people and groups

discussed in this chapter. Fortunately, we know something of the consequences of this process by observing the lives of saints.

Our task is to grasp something of the personal, group, and institutional dynamics that accent church life. Correct the bad, undergird the good, and seek to glorify our Lord by working for the success of His kingdom. Remember never to yield to the temptation to substitute your knowledge of natural dynamics for dependence on God to work in lives.

In this framework of natural dynamics, God's Holy Spirit will work to develop a great church. That great church, whether numerically large or small, will help believers grow toward spiritual maturity. In this process, the pastor becomes enabler, trainer, coach, teacher, and exhorter.

This chapter is only a beginning for the process of understanding and utilizing the dynamics at work in each church, its people, and its community.

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