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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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The Core Group Drives the Future!

"Our church has a small core group that calls all the shots? What can we do about this?"

Every congregation has such a group. The word "core" probably stems from the Latin word *cor*, which means heart. At the center of every congregation, organization, or corporation is a cluster of people "whose perceived interests and needs are taken into account, consciously or not, as decisions are made throughout the organization." (Art Kleiner, "Are You In with the In Crowd?" *Harvard Business Review*, July 2003)

Critics accuse that core group's members of calling all the shots to fit their personal preferences, even when the decisions are detrimental to the church's effectiveness.

Core group members typically respond with, "Of course our church is run by a click: the click that gets things done, the click that makes the church click!"

New pastors and laypersons, if they misjudge who is in the core group and/or misread its core convictions, find leading impossible. Newcomers who fail to take the core group's priorities into account risk assigning themselves to either (a) peripheral leadership roles or (b) downright rejection.

Core groups are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but they are *always* present. So the BIG question is never, "Should a core group run the church?" but "What fuels our core group's decisions?" Every core group articulates and promotes a set of beliefs and behaviors that distinguish their congregation from other churches of similar sizes.

The core group's focus either is or is not consistent with the beliefs and behaviors of Jesus and the apostolic church. Core groups in healthy, effective congregations possess and live out those apostolic beliefs and behaviors. Core groups in unhealthy, ineffective churches, across years of experiences and decisions, accidentally lose or intentionally discard those apostolic beliefs and behaviors.

Identifying the Core Group

In few congregations does the core group exceed 5 percent of the active membership? In most churches people name the core group members in every decision-making process. During the debate, someone says, "Jeff is really excited about this idea!" Or, someone says "I feel sure that Larry will oppose that plan!" Thus, the core group is involved in making decisions, even when its members are not present. If thinking patterns begin to shift away from those cherished by a core group member, he or she may feel pushed out of the group or even out of the congregation. That exit seldom occurs without a fight!

Psychological research shows that children are uncannily in sync with their mothers' moods, thoughts, and even their unconscious wishes. Church people also think and act in link-step with their core group.

What if the core group acts deceitfully, inefficiently, with moral cowardice, or with unaccountability? Over the years, the core group tends to reinforce the thinking and behaviors to which it pays the most attention. Thus, dysfunctionality becomes not only accepted by the core group but part of the traditional "way we do things around here." A small congregation's treasurer had for several decades maintained a secret bank account, set aside for a rainy day. Neither the pastor nor the members were aware of these accounts, which never appeared in financial reports.

When people found out about the secret bank account, trust eroded, financial giving dropped, and underground bickering became the church's primary social interaction. The core group said the members "just don't get it!" The congregation became so busy fussing that no time or energy remained to discuss and accomplish ministries. Attendance declined and the future died.

Ethos Drives the Future!

Ethos is the invisible yet powerful foundational character or spirit of a church's culture. In spontaneous, recurring patterns, ethos is the underlying sentiment that drives and refuels a church's beliefs, attitudes, customs, and practices.

Ethos maintains and strengthens congregational beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Healthy, effective churches consistently (a) live by faith in God's guidance, (b) are known by their love, and (c) speak words of hope. (1 Corinthians 13:13) A congregational culture of faith, hope, and love can transform individuals and the communities in which they live. "People are looking for something worth believing in, somewhere to belong, and something to become. In the contexts of an apostolic ethos, those intrinsic longings of the human spirit are called out and then find their fulfillment... Faith, love, and hope are not foundations, they are wellsprings." (Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Unstoppable Force* [Orange: California: Yates & Yates, 2001] pp. 97; 162-163)

Unhealthy, ineffective congregations are weak in either (a) their faith in God's guidance, (b) their love toward people inside and outside the church, or (c) their hope in the future, or weak in all three. God cannot bless an organization that does not embody all three of these apostolic qualities.

Traumatic memories often subvert apostolic beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This usually happens because core group members are trying to protect the church's future. A rural church suffered extreme financial stress during the 1930s Depression years, than again during the 1950s when community population dropped. During the 1980s a capable pastor attracted numerous new members from the expanding population of a nearby town. The church desperately needed a part-time secretary and a youth director; it had a half-million dollars in undesignated reserve funds. However, the core group's traumatic memories about money poisoned the congregation's future. After growing to 170 in worship attendance, the church fell back to 80 and missed its golden opportunity. The bickering that surrounded that bad decision still poisons relationships and future decisions.

What thinking patterns drive the decisions of our congregation's core group?

Values Drive the Future!

Many congregations become frustrated when they set important goals and make plans, then fail to arrive at the destination they so carefully selected. Those failures happen because congregations *always* act on the core values of their core groups, *not* on their goals, plans, or mission statements! Unfortunately, a congregation's core values are always partially invisible to its leaders, submerged in "the way we have always done things here."

Jesus taught his first disciples three core values through The Great Commandment and The Great Commission (Acts 2:41-42, Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 28:19-20). Those three core values summarize as follows: (a) Help people grow spiritually in their relationship with God. (b) Love our neighbors in church, community, and world. (c) Offer Christ to people outside our walls.

The emphasis on, or neglect of, one or two of Jesus' three core values determine a church's destiny: Unhealthy ineffective congregations give most of their emphasis and energy to *one* of Jesus' three core values. Their core group tends to consciously or unconsciously believe the myth that Jesus' *other two* core values happen automatically, as a by-product of focusing on the one core value about which they feel the most passionate.

In other words, when clergy and lay leaders make Jesus' three core values a multiple-choice question, they produce unhealthy, ineffective congregations. Healthy effective congregations behave in ways that give *all three* of Jesus' core values equal emphasis and energy.

What values drive the decisions of our congregation's core group?

Changing the Core Group Changes the Future!

Leading in a new direction always means convincing the core group *first*. Otherwise, the congregation will not go along with a new idea, regardless of its validity.

Core group patterns are not reshaped in an overnight retreat or by writing a mission statement. How, then do core group changes happen? In two primary ways:

1. Repeatedly state and restate apostolic beliefs and attitudes, year after year, and reinforce them by the example. The foundation for persuasive communication is trust, which is only earned over time; there are no shortcuts.

2. Try to enlarge the number of people in the core group. This increases the possibility that apostolic beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors will dilute and replace old patterns.

How can our congregation enlarge its core group and move in more apostolic directions?

The Bottom Line

Technically, the entire membership is responsible for a congregation's future. But that future is actually determined by a small core group.

In what ways can our core group become more capable of building a healthy, effective future?