

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

January 2009 - Volume 17, Number 1

Herb Miller

How to Identify Our Church's Unstated Assumptions

Much stress results from conflicting assumptions regarding the right way to run a church. Two examples:

◆ A new pastor follows the twenty-seven-year tenure of a much-loved pastor who retires. The new pastor—since human cloning is not legal—arrives with *different* assumptions about the right way to run a church. To several of the governing-board members, the change feels like showering in ice-water.

◆ The worship attendance in a small church increased 40 percent. Soon, new governing-board members brought a new set of assumptions regarding the right way to run a church. Procedures changed. New fellowship groups formed. Younger leaders displaced “old guard” leadership. Four long-time-member families departed, murmuring, “It just isn’t the same anymore!”

Playground teeter-totters achieve balance by careful, cooperative efforts from both ends. But in churches, people with opposite assumptions strive for control, not balance. Driven by the altruistic desire to do the right thing, they do damaging things to one another.

Review these ten assumptions about the right way to run a church. Do any of them guide our congregation’s behaviors?

1. Clergy-centered care for the ill—or parishioner-centered care for the ill. In small churches of fewer than 125 in average worship attendance, most members expect the pastor to lead in expressing care and concern for the ill. By contrast, most members in megachurches of more than 1,000 in average worship attendance expect some type of Care Team, comprised of lay volunteers, to make most of the hospital visits.

Midsize churches are called the awkward size because members hold conflicting assumptions on this and many other topics. Midsize-church members who grew up in small congregations are convinced that clergy-centered caring is the right way. Midsize-church members who grew up in large congregations believe that lay volunteers should make most of the hospital visits.

2. Offerings-only motivation for financial giving—or annual-stewardship-campaign motivation for financial giving. A much-loved pastor believed that asking people to sign a pledge card would offend them. During his twenty-

year tenure, he convinced the leaders to take pride in *never* conducting an annual stewardship campaign. Consequently, financial giving was 40 percent less than in similar-size congregations of that denomination.

The new pastor persuasively helped the governing-board members recover from their misguided but cherished assumption. Financial giving rose 30 percent the first year and morale improved. But many older members continue to believe that such campaigns are inappropriate.

3. Community service as a goal—or evangelistic outreach as a goal. The church has slowly declined in attendance for ten years. Susan adamantly believes that evangelistic reach-out to the community happens *only* as a byproduct of community service activities. John, a younger board member, believes that the church must take some *direct actions* to attract young families—such as developing strong children’s ministries and youth groups. The attendance turnaround started when the board recognized that those conflicting assumptions should coexist—as they do in Jesus’s Great Commandment and Great Commission.



4. Authoritarian leadership—or *laissez faire* leadership. Over-functioning pastors and lay leaders are often perfectionists who take pride in doing everything right. Uneasy when others do not acquiesce to their guidance, they tolerate with difficulty the sloppy inconsistencies of decentralized-authority. The result: resentment from numerous passive members who watch from the bleachers as a shorter and shorter list of leaders work harder and harder.

By contrast, under-functioning leaders often (a) fail to understand the importance of committee meetings and ministry teams and (b) fail to recruit people for new ministries. The result: disorganization, confusion, low morale, sparse motivation, and large volumes of nothing happening.

5. “The older members call the shots here.”—or “We elect both older and younger adults to leadership roles.” When older leaders treat young adults, ages eighteen to forty-four, like teenagers—too young to make decisions—those young adults often behave like teenagers (passively watch or rebelliously depart). Young adults only become mature leaders through serving in leadership roles. That inevitably involves some successes and a few mistakes. When are young-adult members’ ideas usually superior to those of older-adult members? When attempting to develop meaningful ministries with their young-adult peers, with youth, and with children.

6. Methodical decision-making—or lightning-bolt decision-making. Some churches fight because pastors and lay leadership rush into changes without scheduling several discussions scattered over weeks or months. The majority of people in every kind of corporation, civic organization, or congregation resist change—any kind of change. But, given time, people can also change their nays to yeas. If given *insufficient* time to process a new idea, resistance often hardens into hostility and fights.

7. Widely affirmed priorities—or priorities known only to a few. Some churches fight because clergy and lay leaders fail to discuss and establish priorities. When that pattern prevails, groups ride off in different directions. Everyone feels stressed as opposite priorities struggle to co-exist in the same budget, the same building, or the same theological frame of reference.

8. “Our church is dying, so why try?”—or “We can survive and thrive if we change procedures.” The disappearance of numerous church members when a factory closed brought (a) feelings of depression, (b) fighting about how to use a shrinking money supply, and (c) conflict resulting from irrational insistence that we keep doing things the way we’ve always done them. Some say that the future looks hopeless and the church will eventually close. Others quip, “If we stop doing the same old things in the same same old ways, something new can happen!”

9. Effective organizational structure—or dysfunctional organizational structure. Establishing appropriate organizational structures enlarges the number of people involved in ministries, reduces conflict, and increases demo-

cratic decision-making. Dysfunctional structures often go unrecognized by church leaders: the defects are invisible due to years of “we have always done it this way.” Does our church’s organizational structure fit its membership size and this generation of attendees?

10. “We keep disagreements on the table until we resolve them.”—or “Talking openly about disagreements would cause hurt feelings and conflict.” Few burning issues are extinguished by refusing to discuss them openly. A better approach: “Let’s get all of the opinions on the table so we can think about this issue as intelligently as possible. We can’t resolve something that we don’t have enough information about.” Then the chairperson waited, listened responsively, and kept repeating her plea that all opinions be heard. Her sensitivity allowed resolution of an issue that in another congregation became a ten-year fight.

Ask the governing-board members to discuss their opinions regarding these questions:

1. Which of the ten assumptions above have caused stress and conflict in our church in the past?
2. Are any of those assumptions causing stress at present?
3. Can you think of additional assumptions, not on that list, that are causing stress?
4. As the list of conflict-causing assumptions emerges, ask people with opposing viewpoints to (a) listen to one another respectfully and (b) restate in their own words what they hear the other person saying.
5. At this point in our congregation’s history, do you see any assumptions on this list that we might want to consider modifying?

When Is Conflict Positive? When two or more people work together on something of mutual interest—such as a marriage, a democracy, or a church—unstated assumptions clash.

Greater harmony often *begins* by openly discussing differences of opinion. When people respectfully listen to one another, they feel emotionally closer, and their problem-solving ability grows stronger.