

Ken Schwanke

When I think of all the people I know who have decided to move out of positions of lay church leadership, several reasons reoccur time and time again. For many it's the conflict. Whatever ideas they had about church leadership didn't include the conflict that often accompanies the decision making process and more often the repercussions afterwards.

For others, the reason for leaving church leadership is because of change. Either there's too much and it happens too quickly, or there's not enough and it takes far too long.

One might think that if we could just get a handle on church conflict and find better ways to manage change, then we'd be able to draft more lay leaders. Yet change and conflict are two ingredients that give our churches life.

Many reading this may find the mention of conflict objectionable. Doesn't conflict argue against the unity we should find in the Spirit? Yet conflict, or more precisely the willingness to have conflict, is a sign of organizational health.

Patrick Lencioni in his ground breaking book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" points out that conflict allows people "to engage in passionate and sometimes emotional debate, knowing that they will not be punished for saying something that might otherwise be interpreted as destructive or critical."¹

Thomlinson posed the question: "Why are we so reluctant to concede that God might perform wonders through vigorous, open and honest debate?" That's a good question. Have

we created an environment where the fear of reprisal or exclusion or censure keeps us from speaking our mind? If that's the case then we have undermined our ability to find the best Spirit-led solutions in the least amount of time.

Moravians define themselves as a tightly knit community. Yet community requires the glue of trust and that comes only as we have confidence that we can speak freely. Trust allows us to have meaningful productive conflict. Without an environment for productive conflict we undermine the trust that holds community together.

For many people who find their involvement in church government less than satisfying, it often comes down to losing sight of the big picture. It isn't that people don't want to be involved; it's that they don't understand why they should bother. It's one thing to be on the sidelines asking, "Why are we doing this?" It's a whole different matter when you're on the inside asking that same question. Especially when you're dealing with change.

The church is notorious for taking too much time making simple decisions, and not enough for complex ones that require thoughtful reflection. This is often frustrating for lay leaders who have a secular job where decisions are made quickly and the reason for them is simple: the bottom line. But what's the "bottom line" in the church?

A number of years ago the church board I was serving on made a decision to introduce a new children's program. The decision came after surveying the teachers and leaders of the program to determine whether the curriculum was accomplishing what they had hoped it would. It was clear from the results that it was not.

People were dissatisfied and losing interest in the program — but it kept on year after year.

Leith Anderson notes that many churches that begin strong with a clear sense of direction either fulfill their original mandate or it is forgotten. Over time “the purpose becomes to keep the institution going.”²

When a church loses sight of why it exists it loses the single most important tool for managing change. If those in charge can’t give a good reason for the decisions they’re making, they open themselves up to endless debate and criticism.

When a church clearly understands its purpose it has a grid for decision making. Purpose answers a lot of questions up front. Why should we do this activity instead of that one? Why should we make this purchase instead of making do with what we have? Is this issue worth debating? Should we make this change?

I’m afraid the motivation behind many changes is little more than, “because we need to try something to attract new people.” In other words, we need to keep the institution going.

What is our purpose? For Moravians serving in both vocational and lay leadership positions this is a vital question. It’s at the heart of why we do what we do.

I can think of dozens of things I’d rather do than sit in a church basement on a Thursday night talking about whether we should replace the linoleum. But get me talking about ways we can tweak our ministry so we are more visitor friendly — that gets me excited. Or whether we should be intentional about starting small groups that are geared towards inviting new people — that gets me excited too! Or providing ministry

opportunities for members at a local soup kitchen or mission experiences for youth — that really pumps me up! Why is that? Because it directly addresses our purpose: making disciples (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Footnotes

¹ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 202.

² Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), 112.

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