

The Competitive Church

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The church and state have not always been separated. In the 1700's, the early years of our nation, churches were supported by local and state governments (Massachusetts did not stop supporting pastors until 1833). When this support was removed, a new type of church emerged, the competitive church. Suddenly ministers were complaining because other ministers began to move into their parish and draw their members away. Ministers criticized their competing minister as ungodly, and less-than holy or honorable. These squabbles were within and without denominational structures. The Presbyterians began to separate and take camps based upon ideology, breaking the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

What happens to the church in our early history is that an organizational structure that is based upon mutuality, sharing, and trust, runs into a nation based upon capitalism, competition, and profit. The competitive church has a goal of numerical growth of members and money. This means innovation and increased market share. While serving at McCormick, I recruited a student who said his goal was to be a pastor of a mega-church. This young man simply made explicit what many others were thinking. As an American in a capitalistic society, his desire was to be on top and to be the best. He perceived the best as pastoring a mega-church.

We too want the best. We too struggle with being competitive and cooperative; being the church of increased numbers and yet being a place of sharing, connectedness, and trust.

Gareth Morgan writes about paradox management in "Images of Organization." I have modified his list for our work in the presbytery:

What's Next

Innovate
Think Long term
Reduce Staff
Be Flexible
Collaborate
Decentralize

Status Quo

Avoid Mistakes
Deliver Results Now
Improve Teamwork
Respect Rules
Compete
Retain Control

What is important is that BOTH lists have merit, and a good strategy for institutional change will use both sides of the ledger. Our challenge is not to declare one side right and the other wrong, but to realize we are both the competitive church, and the connected church. At any point we may emphasize one or the other, and this is where good leadership is critical.