

The Church Organizational Model

John was the senior pastor of a large Midwestern church. He was facing a possible \$150,000 shortfall in the church budget due to an economic downturn in the area. He knew that some hard decisions would have to be made. Some of these decisions would be driven by the shortfall coupled with ministry philosophy shifts. Other decisions would be driven by the hard realities of personnel, whose skill sets no longer fit with the retooled positions.

When the smoke cleared at the church, two full time and two part-time people had been let go. After two contentious town hall meetings, John realized that this was a congregational storm that would take time to weather, with people second-guessing decisions. Paradoxically, this storm has unfolded just when ministry numbers and general response to ministry has trended upward.

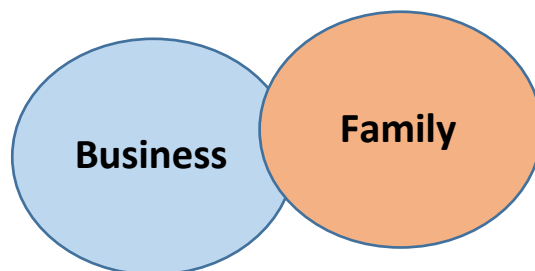
Downsizing church staff is only one instance that introduces challenges that almost any other organization doesn't understand. This is basically because the church involves an organizational model that hardly, if any, other organization faces.

I have consulted in basically all of the organizational models that exist, from government to private non-profit, to multi-national corporation. I have not encountered the complexity that the church world presents organizationally. And unfortunately, few church leaders have been trained to understand this complexity, much less how to navigate it effectively.

Organizational models of the church

The Family/Business/Faith Community Conundrum

What generally makes church life and functioning so very confusing is the fact that, like no other organization in society, church encompasses people's expectations of family, business and faith community. Each of these elements must be held in tension, and each must be understood clearly, or else confusion will ensue. Because churches operate much like families, and those who work on staff are often church members, the emotional impact decisions, such as being downsized, has repercussions of, "My family just threw me out" and the congregation chorusing, "You can't let go of Suzie, she's family!"





As a business

Churches, especially those with multiple staffs, have management considerations that require the best principles of business.¹ People are hired to do particular types of work according to their individual skill sets, performance standards are established and maintained, salaries are set, and work is accomplished and evaluated. When work falls below par, accountability kicks in and people may be fired for poor performance. When there is a budget shortfall, considerations as to staffing needs are prime considerations.

As the church grows, and staff is added, senior pastors often find themselves attending more and more to management concerns. For the pastor (which is most of them) who is neither adept nor interested in management, this can become more of a problem. Staffs that are ignored tend to become misaligned with everyone (beginning with the senior pastor) defaulting to self-interest.

Church staffs that grow to a certain size need to be managed effectively. Churches historically have turned to hiring executive pastors (ordained) or executive directors (lay). Ideally this should free the senior pastor to function within his skill set unencumbered by management concerns.

The Pastor as businessman. That's right, in some sense you need to see yourself wearing a business hat. I realize this is quite contrary to why you chose ministry. But if you can't see yourself in this hat, leading the church will be problematic.

One critical aspect of your ministry-as-business obligation is alignment. Alignment has to do with configuring all the resources of the church (staff, programs, buildings, budget) so that the mission of the church is carried out. In recent years, churches have turned to some form of strategic planning in order to rationally align.

Strategic planning helps churches understand the current state of the church, helps determine what the church is called to be, and provides tangible and immediate action steps for the next part of the journey. It provides focus, structure and alignment. Strategic planning helps determine the realities of the church, shape or sharpen core values, mission, and strategy, and point to next steps to move the church from being good to being great.

¹ See Chapter 14 on best management principles.

Every church should start with a clear sense of its True North – the core values, mission, vision and strategy. Once that is clear, the other elements should align to that true north. The problem that most churches face is that one of the other elements tends to become more important than its true north. We've all seen churches where their brand (often the senior pastor) is what the church is known for. In other churches, the support structures take over (buildings, finances, professional staff) and replace the church's mission. I have worked with several churches where the building was True North. One church was in a decaying steel town. The gleaming white church stood amidst crumbling buildings all around. The ruling board saw their main mission as preserving the pretty building.

Alignment will be accomplished and maintained as you are able to constantly 'sing' three songs...

- This is our mission (why this church exists, and for whom)
- These are our values (this is what is most important to us)
- This is the vision (this is where we're going and our desired future), and
- This is the strategy (this is how we intend to get there)

Unfortunately, many if not most churches have been very sloppy when it comes to these four themes. Oh yes, they may have come up with a mission statement and something about values and maybe even vision. But once posted on the website, all is forgotten.

But let me be clear, these four themes should be your pair of glasses, focusing everything you do, every building you build, every staff person you hire, every program you initiate. In church after church with which I've been associated, there aren't these glasses to help see what is most important, and what should be jettisoned. Constantly, church programs and personnel grow without any particular direction in mind. It is imperative that you get these issues clear and then use them in church board meetings, church town hall meetings, and in staff meetings to align everyone around the why that the church exists, where it is going, how it's going to get there, and what's most important.

Not only do you have to 'sing,' you also as 'businessman' have to coach. And as a coach, you need to get good at (and this goes for staff and volunteers)...

- Selecting Your Players (what skills does each position require, and who has them)
- Setting Expectations for Your Players (this is specifically what you need to do). One of the biggest fallacies I've seen in church-as-business is the lack of clear performance criteria and, on top of this, the often absence of regular performance evaluations. What evaluations that do exist are often extremely subjective and not tailored to the specific staff positions.
- Motivating Your Players (each player has different motivational needs, which must be understood), and
- Developing Your Players (helping each player grow and flourish in his/her position)

Consider These Points and Questions when in the Business Arena

- There's hierarchy here: What's the organizational chart? Who answers to who?
- Who's above you? Who's below you? Who's beside you?
- How does authority (power) really work here? Who are the persons and/or families that exert those most influence on decision-making (usually but not always the biggest donors)?
- The system is perfectly designed to give you the results you're getting. So how is this system actually designed? (That could look very different from the org chart). Who's allied with who? Against who?
- When is the hierarchy honored? Violated? By Whom? In what situations?
- What are the ongoing conflicts (now probably under the surface) that have never been resolved?

As a family

When we look at the church as a family, clergy are perceived as parents and congregants operate as siblings.² Church members feel as though they are coming home, and therefore have particular idealistic expectations as to what they will find, and how they will be treated. When paid staff members are also church (i.e. "family") members, the expectations rise beyond the average business employee.

An apocryphal story might prove the point. Pastor John calls the church custodian Bill into his office. Bill is also a church member.

"Bill," says the pastor, "we need to have a talk. For the past six months I've watched your performance deteriorate. You haven't been cleaning properly. Your set ups and take downs haven't been effective. All in all, your performance has been awful, though I've pointed this up to you over and over. Bill, I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go. And now Bill, I have to change my 'hat' from being your employer to the pastor 'hat.' Bill, I just heard you lost your job. What can I do to help?"

All of this adds up to the fact that getting rid of employees who are church members is very difficult. Each person who works for a church has a constituency around them – a constituency that holds them in high regard and who is willing to come to their defense when termination looms. And this constituency rarely if ever is aware of any performance issues that may lead to

² Sibling rivalry is created by treating one sibling special. As ministers elevate one or more parishioners to places of prominence, or even friendship, often hurt feelings and general dissatisfaction is generated among those less favored.

termination.³

I have worked with several churches that have let go of key personnel who also happened to be underperforming (in the business circle) but who were greatly loved by church members (in the family circle). One such person had worked at the church for over 20 years. This person had begun a ministry for which a number of congregants volunteered. The only problem? This person refused to take direction from the senior or executive pastor, had rarely come to staff members, and had basically never participated in church functions other than this person's own ministry. In other words, this person was a bad employee and bad team player. But the people who volunteered in the ministry didn't know any of this. And when this person was finally terminated, many in the congregation were 'up in arms' at the senior pastor. Plus, this terminated person's story was the only story being told. For the senior pastor to state why exactly this person had been terminated was to invite a defamation lawsuit.

Transference vs. Projection. Pastors need to get a sense of these two concepts in order to understand many of the issues that swirl around them. Let's first take a look at transference. Transference is actually a three-person dance: you the pastor, a staff member or parishioner who is present, and someone from that parishioner or staff person's past (who is not present or even alive physically, but who is very much part of the relationship the pastor has with that other person). Transference takes place when that other person transfers that absent person's qualities, feelings, behaviors, etc., onto you and then reacts to you as if you were the other person. Let's say your parishioner had a father who always yelled at her whenever she asked a question, calling her stupid and ill-informed. That parishioner then transfers those feelings about her father onto you (you're the pastor, and in certain traditions you're even called Father or Mother. As a result, the parishioner acts towards you the way she did towards her father (who may be long dead, but that doesn't matter).

In a sense, transference is like looking at a person but seeing someone else. And once I see that Past person in the Present person, I begin to act accordingly. People who are less self-aware, and who are less emotionally healthy, are the ones who will be ensnared by this the most. These are the people who will often divide the world, or at least the leaders who affect them, into two categories: the good parents and the bad parents. The good parents are those leaders who will (as they unconsciously wish) will heal all of their childhood wounds. Consequently, when a new pastor appears at the church, these are the people who are most joyous and celebratory. But be very cautious of those who initially adore you. These are the ones who will turn on you in a second when their expectations go unmet. And of course, they will go unmet because they are totally unrealistic. There is no way you will heal all of their childhood wounds, nor should you even try. You now shift in that person's mind from the good parent to the bad parent in a heartbeat – the person who once adored you now is leading the cabal to remove you.

³ Clergy are usually unable to be candid about performance issues with the congregation at large. To be clear about why a person was fired or disciplined is to invite a law suit. Usually there is only one story broadcast as to why a person is let go, the story of the person who was let go.

Projection is a less complex concept. Transference takes three people. Projection needs only two. It happens when a person projects his or her own qualities, feelings, behaviors, etc., onto another person. Why would I do this? You might ask. Those qualities that you project are in fact qualities that you find it difficult to own for myself -- those horrible qualities, behaviors, attitudes, etc. that you must guard against in yourself to keep your self-esteem humming along. So when you look at that other person, you don't actually see that person, you actually see *you*.

And when projection is directed at you, what you are hearing from that other person is autobiographical. "Pastor, I want to give you some constructive criticism about your preaching, your personality, whatever." The next words you hear will undoubtedly be a self-description of the person speaking to you. Now understand, if you activate on what is said to (the criticism actually strikes a cord in you: *I actually haven't been putting enough time into my sermons recently*), then you'll own the criticism, and it now is about *you*.

To manage something effectively, you need a basic understanding of what it is you're trying to manage. With a basic understanding of transference and projection, you first need to take note of when you're experiencing these things within yourself, and learn how to see people for who they are. But also remember, as a minister, you're absolutely a transference and projection screen. So many of the criticisms and compliments that come at you are borne along by these two forces which are actually at work constantly within each of us. This is why we said in the first chapter that it is so essential that we have a growing self-awareness.

Consider These Points and Questions when in the Family Arena

- Hierarchy is still a factor – there are parents and there are siblings.
- Clergy are seen as parents (good, until expectations aren't met, then bad by those who are more emotionally precarious as unrealistic expectations go unmet).
- Depending on childhood wounding and subsequent healing → 'You as good parent are to heal all of my childhood wounds' until . . . You fail in your healing powers, then all bets are off.
- What is often said to you is not actually about you (unless you embrace it). You are a screen for projections and transference. Those who are adoring you, and those who are undermining you, are to an extent living out their own childhood stories that have gone unresolved.
- As a family the church community is a caldron of swirling emotional issues and needs that are constantly bubbling up and contaminating the best efforts to move the church in any particular direction. A great deal of discernment and wisdom is needed to effectively navigate all of the competing needs and loyalties, any one of which can derail even the best-intended clergy and/or church board strategy.

As a faith community

Churches are also spiritual communities. Members manifest certain gifts, bear the burdens of

one another, and generally become intentionally involved in one another's lives to the betterment of the individual and the building up of the community (a.k.a., body life). Unlike the above two models, community members have no assumed hierarchy ("neither male nor female, slave nor free"). There is mutual accountability, with no one being "more privileged" than another.

Often ministers and their spouses will join small groups within the church community for fellowship, learning and mutual accountability. But care must be taken as to how the minister is perceived (what 'hat' s/he is wearing) in these small groups. You may think that your on an equal plain with all the other members of the small groups. But your parent 'hat' may loom large to certain group members, who will then defer to you as parent, thus destroying the mutuality that the group hopes to maintain.

Consider These Points and Questions when in the Faith Community Arena

- No hierarchy
- We're all brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Mutual accountability
- Bearing one another's burdens

Unfortunately, as often happens, these three separate functions become confused. When business considerations are handled with family patterns, problems arise. Likewise, if community and family aspects are treated as business it becomes institutionalized. These three models must always be appreciated and negotiated.

Volunteers

And now the wild card, these three interlocking organizational models are surrounded by volunteers. This one aspect of church organizational life can add a great deal of angst to the life of the pastor. Let me illustrate with just one question, How do you fire a volunteer? Good luck, especially in a church setting where being a family is one of the three premium organizational models in play.

There are a number of good articles and books on effectively managing volunteers, so I won't say much here. But attending to several key issues when dealing with volunteers will cut down on headaches considerably.

- 1. Communicate Clear Expectations.** This should include clear job descriptions and an orientation to the church organization as a whole.
- 2. Provide Tools and Training to Perform Job Tasks.** Volunteers who have a positive experience will enjoy their assigned job and will be excited about helping.

3. Recognize Volunteer Contributions. People like to be recognized for a job well done, so incorporate this into your collective church life.

4. Celebrate Successes. Celebrating a successful event is a great way to acknowledge all of the hard work that went into it. **What**

Dual Relationships

Keep in mind that all I've said above about the complicated church organizational model is absolutely fertile ground for dual relationships to develop. Dual relationships occur when a person has multiple roles with another person. That doesn't sound so bad, and it's not some of the time. But it can also be very tricky and problematic at other times. Let me give you an example. I was coaching a minister who, during our first introductory meeting he mentioned he had been playing golf with several church board members. I commented to him, "Well, I assume no church business was discussed." The minister looked sheepish and said, "Is that wrong?" I responded, "No, it's not wrong if the entire board was part of your foursome, and Roberts Rules were clearly in play."

In the above example, the friendship 'hat' of the minister got confused with his leadership 'hat.' "I can be out with a few board members, have a nice round of golf, and discuss church business." Wrong! And yet, this happens all the time when people get confused and fuzzy about what relational 'hat' they're wearing at any given time.

I have several minister friends who refuse to have any close relationships with those in their congregations. One minister told me he had been burned too many times when dual relationship matters surfaced. You as a minister may think you are just having a social interaction with friends, but hidden agendas may lurk which could potentially confuse the relationship.

So what do we do about this?

Leadership must take into consideration what "hat" they are wearing as they prepare to act (e.g., Am I the parent of a family? The CEO of a business? A sister in Christ?) And it must always be made clear to staff and congregants how these differing "hats" will confuse us if we aren't clear in going forward. Then, the following considerations are important:

As a business:

- What are the best business practices I need to be aware of so that I can manage this church effectively?
- Where in this operation are people, programs, or facilities mis-aligned? What steps need to be taken to bring about alignment?
- Am I 'singing' the mission-values-vision-strategy song clear and often enough?
- Am I doing due diligence appropriately when it comes to hiring and developing staff and

volunteers?

As a family:

- Do I understand how projection and transference 'color' relationships within the congregation? Do I monitor this so that my ministry is not adversely affected?
- Am I able to keep on top of swirling emotional issues that can contaminate the unfolding ministry? If I have trouble in this area, do I have people I can rely on to help me see clearly what themes might be unfolding that need attention?

As a faith community:

- Trust is the critical foundational element to the healthy functioning of a faith community. What am I doing to enhance trust, beginning with my staff?
- Do I provide instruction in authentic community building, and do I myself participate in an authentic community where I am known, understood and held accountable?