

Philosophical Underpinnings - Fostering a Church Culture

Shared Ministry

Programs for integrating new members and developing a strong volunteer base are much more likely to succeed in a congregation which has been able to articulate its mission and which takes ownership of the ministry of the church. Ministry is everything we do that supports our mission, from the seemingly most mundane tasks, such as making the coffee on Sunday morning, to the loftiest worship, social action, or pastoral care programs. Shared ministry refers to the fact that all members of the church participate in the ministry, not only the ordained ministers. When a congregation really understands that it is the members who own and create the ministry, it empowers them and becomes a source of pride and satisfaction to participate. It is through service to a worthy common cause that we build the most meaningful relationships with others. Co-creating our ministry is that common cause. To promote the understanding of shared ministry within a congregation, it is often helpful for a church to organize a workshop, preferably facilitated by a minister or "expert" from outside the congregation, to explain and demonstrate the concept. Repeated use of the phrase in newsletter articles and sermons over a period of time, praise for good examples of shared ministry, and a mission covenant development process all contribute to a gradual cultural shift that will bring powerful long term benefits. See *III.e. Responsibilities, Benefits* and *V.a. Sharing the Ministry* for further discussion.

True Openness to New People

The process of new member integration and volunteer coordination begins the first time a visitor comes to your church. The culture exhibited on Sunday mornings, both in the service and in the coffee hour, tells the newcomer whether they are likely to fit in. Most congregations profess to want visitors to feel welcome, but many are unaware of how the habits of people who know each other well can seem cliquish and uninviting to newcomers. Coffee hour can be especially daunting, while to long time members, chatting away with their friends, that time seems to be one of the friendliest activities of all. We can acknowledge that it is more comfortable to come to church when we know many of the people we see there, and that resistance to growth is often resistance to seeing mostly strangers in our church home. But the comfort of present members is not the mission of our church. Being truly welcoming requires that a significant portion of the members chat with newcomers, not their old friends. It requires an attitude as well as specific programs that tells the newcomers they are important to us. No visitor should ever be left standing alone with a cup of coffee while members are standing around talking with each other. Some congregations may need an organized "host" program, where specific people are assigned to make sure that all visitors are talked to throughout the coffee hour. A formal program may not be needed in a church whose culture is more naturally welcoming. See *II.a. The First Impression* and *II.e. The Second Impression*.

High Expectations

One reason often given for skirting the issue of the expectations of membership is that we are afraid that new people will be frightened off if we talk about those expectations. We attract those people who are looking for what we are ... so what are we? If we do not expect a generous pledge and active involvement on the part of our new members, then we will attract people who don't want to be so challenged. If we are forthright about our expectations of a pledge level corresponding to ability to pay, and we enthusiastically believe that involvement offers the best rewards of membership, then we will attract those who want to contribute their time, talent and treasure to make the church all it can be. If high expectations for financial contributions and volunteer involvement are tempered with an expressed compassion for individual circumstances, then newcomers usually will react positively to the challenge. Let them know that you understand that people come with a full range of financial, emotional, and time available circumstances, and that you are willing to accept them as they are while also holding up the ideal of a committed, active member as the one most satisfied with and rewarded by their membership.