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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Should Our Congregation Offer More Choices?

For most of the history of human beings on this planet the vast majority of people have shaped their lives in response to scarcity.

One consequence of that thinking pattern was to view life as offering most of us two choices: Do you eat or go hungry? If you become ill, will you live or die? Will you attempt to kill the enemy or will the enemy kill you? When you become a young adult, will you remain in the community where you have been living or go elsewhere to create a new future?

The Great Depression of the 1930s taught millions of Americans that you have two choices: “Take it or leave it!” In the early 1940s young male Americans were asked, “Will you enlist or wait to be drafted?” High school graduates were asked, “Do you plan to get a job or go to college?” Young wives were asked, “Do you plan to continue in the paid labor force or raise a family?”

On the congregational scene the following five examples, from a much longer list, illustrate the habit of offering people either-or choices:

1. Do you choose to worship at the early service or the late service on Sunday morning?
2. Do you support or oppose the pastoral search committee’s recommendation for our next minister?
3. Do you favor or oppose the recommendation to relocate our meeting place?
4. Will you increase your financial commitment for the next fiscal year?
5. Will you say yes or no when invited to teach the high school class in our Sunday school?

But today’s congregations serve in a new cultural context whose adults have very different thinking patterns. One example of congregational response to the current insistence on more choices is in the financial support of missions.

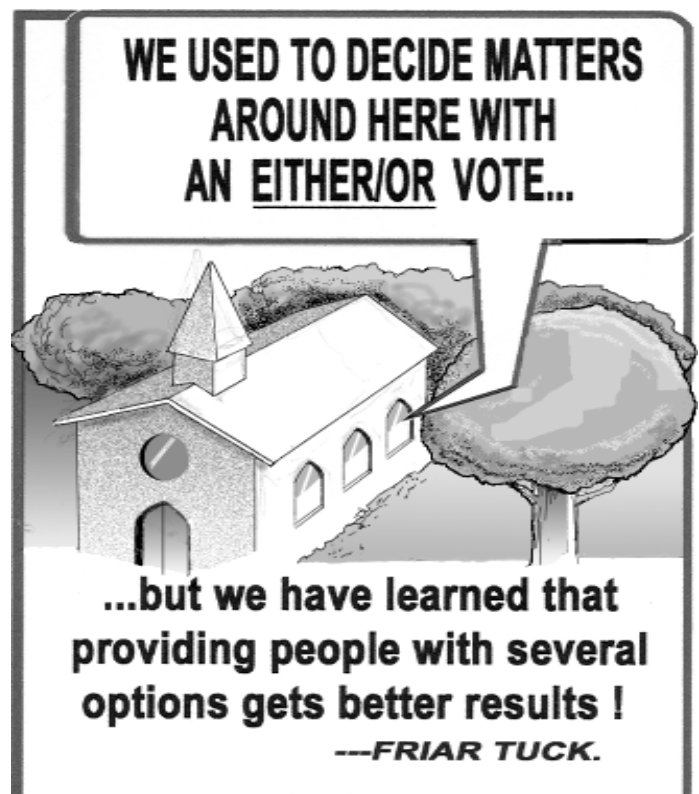
—The old rulebook called for members to provide financial support for a list of missional causes created by the missions committee or by the denominational headquarters.

—The new rulebook encourages donors to designate the specific cause that their contribution will help support.

—A more radical, and increasingly common, practice encourages donors to add to that list of approved causes.

A second example of the demand for more choices is illustrated by one congregation’s strategy to finance the relocation of the meeting place. After nearly three years of study and discussion, a congregational meeting approved the recommendation to relocate the meeting place. The vote was 63 percent in favor and 25 percent opposed, while 12 percent of those present abstained. The governing board appointed a new group of leaders to design a comprehensive plan for accomplishing this relocation decision.

The new “Steering Committee” created a five-point strategy. The committee gave a copy of that strategy to every church member two months before the congregational meeting, along with the announcement of times and dates for



three discussion meetings during those eight weeks, and the encouragement for every member and attendee to attend one of these discussions. The strategy:

- ◆ First, purchase a twelve-acre parcel of vacant land at an excellent location for \$785,000.
- ◆ Second, construct a \$3.5 million “big box” on that site as the first unit of the building plan.
- ◆ Third, allocate \$600,000 for furnishings.
- ◆ Fourth, as soon as that building is ready for occupancy, become a two-site congregation with Sunday morning worship at both the present location and the new location.
- ◆ Fifth, two years after that first service at the new site, schedule a congregational meeting to vote on whether to continue as one church or to become two separate congregations.

The final paragraph of that strategy read: “We need majority support to adopt this plan. A bank has promised that if we can raise \$2 million dollars, they will loan us the other \$3 million. The votes are a dollar each. You may cast as many votes in cash or one-year pledges as you wish. The polls close in thirty days. If we have two million yes votes, the motion carries.”

That strategy gave people several weeks to discuss the plan before they were asked to decide whether they wanted to support it or not. The strategy gave people time to talk themselves into supporting it. And the strategy called for change by addition to congregational ministries via the two-site model for accommodating more people—rather than subtraction by eliminating the old site.

That strategy gave people more than two years to decide whether they wanted to continue to worship God in that sacred room at the old site or to help pioneer the future in a new building. The old pattern—offering people a choice between change and attempting to perpetuate the past—gave each vote equal weight and was biased against change. They also could experience the new before deciding whether or not they wanted to abandon the old. *Instead of giving the vote of each person equal weight, this process was biased in favor of change.*

Always remember to ask, “What is the larger context?” In another congregation in another state, the twenty-five-year tenure of the sixty-eight-year-old senior pastor was coming to an anticipated conclusion. The paid program staff included the Senior Pastor, a full-time Associate Minister in his sixth year, a full-time sixty-two-year-old Director of Christian Education, and a half-time Director of Music.

The old rulebook called for appointing a Search Committee to find and recommend a successor for the Senior Pastor.

The new rulebook calls for a four-stage process:

- ◆ First, design and approve a detailed ministry plan for the next five years.
- ◆ Second, develop detailed recommendations for the schedule, real estate, staff, and money required to implement the plan after it has been amended and adopted.
- ◆ Third, create a strategy for replacing the current staff configuration with the staff configuration required to effectively implement the ministry plan. (One outcome in that congregation, not always appropriate for every congregation, was the decision to replace the old positions of Senior Pastor and Associate Minister with a co-pastorate.)
- ◆ After accomplishing that transition, the fourth stage is to complete the process by creating a new staff team that matches the ministry plan.

In other words, instead of seeking to fill a staff vacancy, the new rulebook calls for first designing and adopting a ministry plan that focuses on ministry in twenty-first century America. The next step is to identify the means-to-an-end needs such as real estate, schedule, appropriate staff configuration, and money. After completion of those two steps in the process, informed decisions on choosing the paid staff members are possible.

Another example of introducing change is the adoption of a comprehensive ministry plan designed to increase the demographic diversity by revising the weekend worship schedule to include four options:

(1) a traditional liturgical worship service in English with organ music, (2) a “contemporary” service in English that includes a band and praise music, (3) a 1955-model “informal” worship service concurrently with the contemporary service, and (4) a Sunday morning worship service in Spanish followed by a Sunday school in Spanish, plus a 7:00 p.m. Sunday evening worship experience designed, owned, and operated by and for older teenagers.

In another congregation the new ministry plan was designed to reach more adults born after 1970. This “change by addition” recommendation was to affirm and continue the traditional adult classes attended largely by persons born before 1960—but gradually to create a dozen new adult “learning communities.” A few of those groups would meet at the Sunday school hour but most would be expected to choose a meeting time during the week.

What additional choices should our church offer?