



THE HEALTHY CHURCH: LEADERSHIP REQUIRES THE ABILITY TO “BE QUICK TO LISTEN”

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IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

In my work with churches I see a variety of responses to the importance of listening. Some embrace the priority of listening while others brush it aside as a non-essential component to the strategic planning process, leaning instead on purely tactical approaches. Invariably the listening approach yields better fruit.

The team at “First Christian Church” readily acknowledged that they could not find clarity on the huge decisions ahead without engaging in a season of discernment. They were faced with a defining growth decision with four options: build on their current property, relocate to a new site, begin to plant churches or pursue multi-site options.

Our process together began with extensive listening. First of all, I encouraged each of them to establish the priority of listening in their individual prayer closets. In order for the team to listen well to one another and all their various constituencies they first needed to know how to listen well to God.

On retreat and in their team meetings I encouraged them to pursue the spiritual discipline of listening prayer. We practiced sitting together in silence, quieting our hearts and minds while reflecting on a short passage of Scripture. I urged them to linger in the text and allow the Spirit of God to envelop them with His love and mercy. They offered simple prayers inviting the Lord to direct their steps. It was refreshing and renewing and preparatory for all of their conversations as a team. As a result it slowed them down long enough to cast aside the cares of their day and be present with one another.

DISCIPLINE IS NEEDED

Attentiveness to the voice of God is the leader’s first step toward listening to others. Continually coming back to this priority is the discipline needed for effective leadership of a church or ministry team.

In contrast, the team at “Second Community Church” rejected the suggestion to schedule a team retreat and reconfigure their planning meetings to reflect the same spiritual priorities of First Christian. They thought they knew better how to tackle the challenges before them. A small handful of leaders took the reins and began their process in earnest.

When I was contacted about coming in to consult with Second Community I learned they had previously hired a consultant to take a pulse on their congregation. They took a survey of a couple

dozen congregants, compiled the data and came to quick conclusions about their future direction.

The pastor had not been included in the meetings. The team was appointed by the deacons and led by a long-time member (and power player). Those with the best perceived gifts at strategic planning were asked to join the team. Within a few short months they had masterminded a plan for all to embrace. They told the membership about the plan and were denied approval.

SHOCKED TO DISCOVER

They were shocked to discover that no one felt called to make their plan a reality. The people most impacted were not brought into the process until the final vote. A small cadre of leaders had taken what had worked for them in other settings and brought it into the church.

Not only had they not listened to God in earnest, the leaders didn’t take the time to listen to anyone but themselves. The team failed the congregation by taking matters into their own know-it-all hands and avoided connecting with anyone else. Lots of quick talk among themselves but that was about it.

There was no listening or sorting of meaningful data. The inevitable result was anger, frustration and dissonance among the people. For Second Community Church the “master plan” fell on deaf ears, blank stares and tucked away checkbooks. No one owned the results because only a few had owned the process and had a voice in the final result. If they kept this course of action it may have led to further dissatisfaction among the people, dissent of opinion and ultimately discord and disillusionment. Fortunately they recognized the need to listen before it was too late.

For First Christian’s discernment process and Second Community’s planning process (once they recovered from the first round fiasco), the course of action was slightly different. However, the basic overview of the listening initiative was the same.

Once the rhythm of prayerful listening was in place in both settings the team was ready to move into new areas of connection with their various constituencies. They knew this would be time-consuming but ultimately very insightful. There were six projects to undertake as a team.

1. They listened to their demographic data. Searching for this information has become much easier with the expansion of the Internet and the availability of national census information. Downloading data from the Web and compiling it on

simple spreadsheets provides much-needed insight into trends surrounding the church today. Knowing about changes in socio-economic issues over the years helps church leaders make informed decisions about their ministry.

2. They listened to their congregation and leadership team members. Conducting a church health assessment among a large swath of church members helps the planning team to get a handle on the current perceptions of the church. Looking at all the areas of church life in a comprehensive manner will aid in identifying where the church is strong and where there is need for improvement. Putting the stethoscope on the heart of the people and listening intently to their joys and concerns will undoubtedly lead to new insights and initiatives.
3. They listened to their unchurched neighbors. Taking time to craft a simple survey to use with over-the-fence conversations will add fodder to insightful ministry within and among the community. Listening to what those outside the fellowship think and feel about matters of faith and the local church brings freshness into the team meetings. Sharing with one another about the real needs of real people will keep the ministry relevant to the families seeking to be reached.
4. They listened to their community leaders. Similar to the unchurched neighbor reflections are visits to the city/town hall, the public schools, local businesses and other churches. By putting together a common set of questions to ask of each person the team who set out to interview other leaders will gain perspective unattained by merely listening to each other. When the opinions of community leaders are collated their shared concerns may in fact birth a new ministry. Better yet, by listening to other leaders in the city/town the reputation of the church is advanced.
5. They listened to their prayer warriors. By asking for insight from those who have been a part of the church over the years — and are known for their prayerfulness — they reach into the soul of the congregation. Listening to how their prayers have shifted over the years and how their prayers have been answered or denied will add depth to the process. Paying attention to those who pray adds life and strength to any healthy team.
6. They listened to focus groups. Bringing together small groups of various people from the congregation to pray, worship, share and listen adds a quality of renewal among the members. Taking the time to set up randomly selected meetings like these will lead to greater ownership of the process of discernment and the important decisions to be made. Involving as many people as possible to speak into the current and future direction of the church has a positive ripple effect on each aspect of church life and ministry.

Paying close attention to the Scriptures and prayer a healthy team reflects together on their life in Christ and in community. Out of this ongoing discipline of becoming proficient in being “quick to listen” their speech is weighted toward giving voice to God’s will for sharing life together.