

Congregational Change: How to Avoid Common Pitfalls

Whether a congregation is amalgamating, forming a cluster ministry or joining a multi-point charge, how it prepares for change will greatly determine the success of the new venture.

Here is a list of things to watch out for when tackling change. This list was prepared by regional staff person John-Peter Smit.¹ Although the list refers specifically to amalgamations, it can be applied to any process of reformulating church ministry.

1. Making the amalgamation about survival or money. It almost guarantees failure. There has to be a larger vision.
2. Making it about winners and losers. (“We got to keep OUR building, OUR minister.”)
3. Proceeding to amalgamation without the people knowing each other. Social time together is huge!
4. Getting too many people involved in the process.
5. Letting the project get hijacked by outside agendas.
6. Getting people off track. Everyone needs to be clear about the outcome.
7. Stopping part way.
8. Forcing the process too quickly.
9. Dragging the problem too slowly.
10. Leaving with the perception that closing is failure. “I can’t imagine doing anything for over a century and then concluding, ‘we failed,’” says Smit.
11. Failing to appreciate or provide for the symbols of the congregation – pulpit, communion table, etc.
12. Failing to understand the stages of grief.
13. Ministers failing to understand that they will often be the focus of anger and frustration and are therefore unable to endure the discomfort it requires.
14. Treating it as a pragmatic decision rather than a holy, ministry decision.

“The bottom line is not the existence of the congregation. The bottom line is whether the mission and ministry of Christ is being carried out in the context of the local congregation,” adds the PCC’s mission and educational consultant in Atlantic Canada, Kenn Stright.

“There is no one method or process or ‘quick-fix’ for congregations. Each has its own context and each must find the way forward for itself.”

¹ This list ran in The Presbyterian Record, November 2010 and is used with permission.