

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### How to Make the Most of a Consulting Process

Church leaders face challenging questions without simple answers. Questions like, should we relocate to a new community, construct a new building, or renovate at our existing site? Hire a new staff person or reconfigure the job descriptions of our current staff? What kind of pastoral leadership will we need when our current pastor retires? Church-wide decisions like these reflect high-risk choices, which tempt members to maintain the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

#### Why Hire a Consultant?

Change is the underlying objective behind every effective consulting process. Leaders hire a consultant when choosing among multiple options seems impossible and perhaps controversial. But they know that doing nothing is no longer an option. Consultants can help the church because they are outsiders—they can see things that church leaders cannot see. Because of their broad experience, consultants know things that church leaders do not know. And consultants have the freedom to say things that local leaders cannot say. Finally, when the church pays for information and assistance, they more often act on it.

Churches often lag behind size shifts, cultural change, and community dynamics. Therefore, in many church situations, the basic problem rests in the organizational structure and how it functions—not in the church members. A consultation can help leaders update organizational decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup>

Finding the right consultant for your church takes time. Contact judicatory leaders, national denominational offices, seminaries, and other churches that have used a consultant or trained facilitator in the past. Form a small group, including the pastor, to review the list of names. Gather information on three to five consultants to learn about their background and experience with congregations similar in size to your own. Be prepared to share a brief summary of the issues facing your church. Then, draw up a list of questions to ask each possible candidate. Set up conference calls or Skype/Face Time sessions with the top three candidates. Once the committee comes to a

consensus about the best candidate, contact several churches that have used this consultant to hear about their experiences. If their reports are positive, contact the desired consultant and begin the process.

#### Hallmarks of a Good Consultant

Unfortunately, many believe they are or could be great consultants but few measure up. A good consultant should exhibit these attitudes and behaviors:

- curious, accepting, and empathetic
- a good listener who asks novel questions rather than telling others what to do
- able to establish a trusting and respectful relationship with the pastor and other leaders
- objective and more committed to the process than a specific outcome or change
- patient yet motivated to keep working through barriers to resolve central issues
- comes without an agenda or a “one-size-fits-all” recommendation template that treats your church as a clone of the consultant’s past experiences

#### Hallmarks of an Effective Consulting Process

Although consultants vary in the details of their approach, all effective consulting rests on several



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HERE TO PROVIDE FRESH INSIGHT, WISE ADVICE, AND  
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key principles. A consulting process is more likely to lead to desired changes if

- the pastor and lay leaders participate in all aspects of the process, including the decision making about possible recommendations;
- the person or group who holds the veto power to block any major change are essential participants;
- the consultation is directed toward the church's agreed-upon objectives;
- the consultant makes presentations that further invite participation in the process;
- the consultant provides concrete methods for the church's next action steps; and
- the consultant's written report after the consultation is widely shared among members.

Consultation methodology is systematic so that all viewpoints and concerns surface. Typically, the consultant asks leaders to gather detailed information about

- the reasons for the consultation, including a written summary statement from the pastor that outlines what he or she wants to accomplish;
- the community setting, including population trends and religious group patterns;<sup>3</sup> and
- the opinions and values of the governing board, committees or teams, and members through questionnaires.<sup>4</sup>

Even after the church prepares this information, the on-site interaction between the consultant and leaders yields new insights. In addition to personal observations, the consultant interviews individual members, who are selected by the pastor. During the visit, the consultant holds small-group meetings with key committees or teams and staff. The consultant should make at least one church-wide presentation where observations and recommendations are shared and discussed.

In the end, an effective consultant affirms the pastor's leadership and plays the role of facilitator. During the consultant's visit, the consultant shifts any remaining functions to the pastor and leaders, which discourages long-term dependency. Success comes from the efforts of the pastor and members.

### **The Power of Questions**

Positive change arises from an open discernment process where committed individuals wrestle with how to do ministry together. Resistance to change comes from fear and lack of involvement in the process. Change always involves loss and grief because it asks people to give up part of themselves—their present experiences and the treasured past.

Powerful questions can persuade people to accept change and point to the rewards of new ministry methods. Answering the questions below helps churches understand who they are, where they have been, and what God is calling them to be in the future.

- If you made a list of the best things that have happened in this church during the past five years, what items would appear on the top of that list?
- If you made a list of some things that have happened during the past five years that were not so positive, what would appear on that list? Can you make a list of areas where the church needs to be stronger?
- As you look to the next five years, what are some of the challenges this church will need to address in a positive manner to build a better future?
- Assume that it is now one year from today, and this consultation process has yielded everything you thought it might in your wildest dreams. If you were making a list of the major changes that have occurred, what would be on that list?

### **The Bottom Line**

The consulting process may cause church leaders to face some bad news that they would rather ignore. Ignoring certain realities only leads to more anxiety. The willingness to put all issues out on the table for consideration actually reduces anxiety. Resolving the central issues that prompted the consultation won't be perfect or complete, but it will be realistic and produce desired changes emerging from the best efforts by the pastor, members, and consultant. Congregations can discover the many strengths that they already have in ministry, find unexpected hope in their current circumstances, and learn about new strategies to grow stronger in ministry.

1. These insights are based on Herb Miller's congregational consultations in more than seven hundred congregations in twenty-eight denominations.

2. See the resource at <http://www.theparishpaper.com/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2023.pdf>.

3. See Community Profile Builder (<http://www.thearda.com/profile/>); and the U.S. Census website, the American Fact-Finder (<http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml###>).

4. See a survey for discovering core values (<http://tinyurl.com/ParishPaper-CoreValues>); and another survey that reveals church strengths ([www.USCongregations.org/survey](http://www.USCongregations.org/survey)).