

# When a Church Goes Corporate

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Samuel was the last of the Judges to shepherd Israel. Near the end of his life, the elders of Israel came to him with a very troubling request. They told Samuel, "We want a king. We want to be like the nations around us." (1 Samuel 8:19-20 NLT) To us this may not seem troubling, but to Samuel and the Lord it was.

"Samuel was displeased with their request and went to the Lord for guidance. 'Do everything they say to you,' the Lord replied, 'for it is me they are rejecting, not you. They don't want me to be their king any longer.'" (1 Samuel 8:6-7 NLT)

Now transpose that situation into the present in the context of the church. Some churches, especially larger ones, have also made a troubling demand. "We want a CEO. We want to be like the corporations around us." Does this application take too much liberty with the text? I don't think so! Let's consider some key differences between corporations and the church.

### *Purpose*

A corporation exists to make money. If a corporation fails at this central goal, it will cease to exist. Although its employees benefit from the business, it does not exist for them but for its customers and shareholders. Yes, a company makes a product or provides a service, but only for the purpose of making money. If that product or service becomes unprofitable—no matter how noble it is, the company will discontinue that product or service and perhaps add new ones that guarantee profits.

A church exists to glorify God, build up and grow its members, and represent Christ to the world. (See Ephesians 1:14; 4:11-16; and Matthew 28:18-20.) We must apply this purpose to include pastors, elders and staff. They too are part of the body, the church family. In addition to existing for Christ and the world, the church—unlike a corporation—also exists for itself.

### *Means to achieving purpose*

The primary means through which a corporation achieves its purpose to make money is by leveraging *efficiency*. The company will doggedly drive for efficiencies in productivity, quality, safety, waste, costs, etc. Taking advantage of efficiencies is the chief means for making money. The pursuit of efficiencies significantly impacts everything a corporation does.

By contrast, the chief means through which a church achieves its purpose is through *relationships*. This is true in terms of our interactions with God, with each other and with the world. The church (including its paid staff) is a family. In contrast with efficiency, relationships can be messy. They require love, forbearance, forgiveness, patience, kindness, and time. Generally speaking relationships are not *efficient*, but they extremely *effective!*

### *Leadership*

Because a corporation is driven by efficiency an efficient form of leadership is needed. A chief operating officer (CEO) with a clear, top-down chain-of-command provides the

needed efficiency. The CEO, with an eye toward meeting customer and shareholder needs, provides direction and sets goals for the company. From these goals and direction all departments and employees derive their goals.

When a new CEO is appointed from outside that corporation he/she often brings with them their own key staff and a shuffle occurs in the organization. One of the maladies inherent with the CEO model is the CEO's tendency to hire leaders like him/herself. The CEO becomes the *standard* of leadership. Those with a variant style of leadership aren't considered qualified to lead, so the hunt goes outside the organization for "more qualified" employees (i.e., those with a similar leadership style to the CEO).

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. His headship creates a leveling of leadership within the church family. With relationships as the means to the church's purpose, pastors, elders, staff and all members are called to *serve* the church family. Church leadership is servant leadership. The byword is "submit to one another." The relational focus of the church demands teamwork (shared leadership) and high levels of accountability to each other.

Teamwork is definitely not the most *efficient* means of leadership! But in the church we are not seeking efficiencies, but relationships and Christlikeness. Team leadership enables us to engage and leverage the values and skills of relationship-building like no other leadership approach. Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. A CEO in the church vies for that headship that only belongs to Christ. The New Testament presents a team model for leadership (a plurality of elders: Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Because a variety of leadership styles are represented on the team, the team recognizes great value in equipping leaders with various styles.

Also, our American custom of hiring professional pastors and staff must subject itself to the leadership model of the New Testament and not the other way around. What I mean is that all pastors must meet the qualifications of an elder whether serving as an elder or not. The elders are to have oversight of the church with all other pastors and staff in submission to them. Some churches have a senior pastor to whom the elders report. Biblically, there's strong evidence that such a senior pastor is usurping Christ's headship!

### *Decision making*

In a corporation decisions follow a top-down approach. At the top, the CEO makes decisions based on market analysis, past history and any other appropriate data he/she can find. The approach seeks to be objective, analytical and scientific. As the CEO's decisions filter down through the organization they drive other like decisions. The corporation desires logical, well-supported, yet speedy decision making. In fact, the ability to make decisions *quickly* is often valued above having made the right decision.

In a church shared leadership seeks to listen to and know the mind of Christ in a matter before proceeding. This can feel like a tedious process for someone bent on efficiency. Our Lord is as concerned about *how* we reach a decision—listening to him, trusting him and working with others—as he is about the decision itself. The reason for this again is

that his goal for us is that we would be conformed to his character. This is worlds apart from the corporate model!

If the leadership team in a church is of one mind and heart, most decisions need not take long to reach. And the outcome always brings the satisfaction of knowing, "We're all behind this decision and we believe God led us here." Also, if we're truly seeking Christ's direction in a matter he will lead us as quickly as he deems necessary. We need to have that kind of trust in our Head.

### *Measures of success*

With efficiency driving a corporation it must develop *metrics* or measurable factors for determining success. Metrics demand clear, documented processes that ensure success. Metrics fall into two categories: leading and lagging. Leading metrics or indicators provide evidence that we are following prescribed processes that are proven to bring about the desired outcome. Lagging metrics or indicators simply tell us after the fact whether we met our goals. Leading indicators are required for managing processes and people. Lagging indicators provide information for reporting purposes and making future decisions.

As opposed to being metrics driven, a church must be *values* driven. Very simply put, the church's values are the character of Christ. Values are relational and require intimate interaction with our Lord, each other and the world. We continually strive to conform to Christ's values. Because of the relational nature of values, success cannot be gauged with metrics in the church.

A key difference between the metrics of a corporation and the values of a church is predictability. Processes are formulaic, relationships are not. A corporation constantly seeks to standardize its processes to guarantee consistency of product or service in order to improve its efficiency and make more money. The company measures adherence to its processes through metrics. In this sense, the church cannot standardize relational interactions to predict outcomes. Even Jesus received a variety of responses from people given the same relational stimuli in the same situation. The church should expect no less.

### *Best Practices*

Another element of metrics is *best practices*. Corporations, driven by efficiency, constantly seek to discover best practices for a particular process. The purpose of best practices is the standardization of processes to ensure predictability of the desired results. Identifying and implementing best practices has had a profound impact on corporations' productivity and profits.

The concept of best practices does not find clean application in the church. Identifying and implementing best practices for the standardization of processes is not a relational pursuit. Borrowing another church's idea for expressing a value like hospitality by promoting *Dinners for Eight* is not a best practice, but simply a creative idea.

Also, just because *Dinners for Eight* has been a successful relationship-building tool in one church does not mean that Christ will direct every other church to implement it.

Making that assumption gets us into trouble. We avoid the work of prayer and listening to God and simply grab what seems to be working in other churches. Then we wonder why the idea failed at our church. We chase success rather than the relationships God seeks.

### *Competitor or collaborator*

In order to secure and maintain its hold in the market a company must be *competitive*. That is it strives to be *better* than its rival companies. In this manner a company unapologetically goes after its competitors' clientele. This is how a free-market model works. But the model also drives an internal competition to outperform other individuals and departments either for the sake of morale or ladder-climbing. Again, in a free-market system this is an accepted and encouraged practice that we have grown to expect of great companies.

The church sets its sights on *collaboration* rather than competition to achieve its purpose. In fact, competition—whether internal or external—runs contrary to Christ's goals and methods in the church. A church that presents a competitive front to the community and other churches will harm the cause of Christ. And competition within the church family creates division and deteriorates relationships.

The church at Corinth had fostered an unhealthy competition that Paul strongly opposed. Instead, he urged them, "I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose." (1 Corinthians 1:10 NLT) Paul repeats this theme to the church in Rome (Romans 14:19); to the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:27); to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:2-6); and to the church at Colosse (Colossians 3:13-14).

The church in Thessalonica demonstrated the kind of inter-church collaboration that pleases God. Their joyous reception of the Gospel in the midst of persecution set an example "to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." (1 Thessalonians 1:7) And the church in Thessalonica "became imitators of God's churches in Judea." (1 Thessalonians 2:14). We are all in this together! "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)

### *People and staffing*

The corporation, whose purpose is to make money as it becomes more efficient, must view people (employees) as a *resource*. This is not evil, but necessary in the corporate model. Even if a company is known for taking care of its employees and providing a great work environment, efficiencies will dictate whether a reduction of workforce is necessary. A company must view its employees as a resource—to be exploited or eliminated based on efficiencies driving profits. People must be expendable in a corporate model.

Because of its focus on competition, the corporation is also on the prowl for the "best" employees. Stacking their human resource with top-notch professionals may give them an edge on their competition and aid them in earning greater revenues. Large

companies spend significant amounts of time and money recruiting and relocating these best-of-the-best.

The church is a family and must view people as brothers and sisters or potential siblings. All people in the church have value and purpose within the church family. Family members are never expendable. All are loved by God and we want to demonstrate his love for them.

Recently a newly arrived senior pastor in a very large church put his staff on notice that none of their jobs are secure. His motivation was not economic, but what corporations call "cleaning house." I have to wonder what the relationships are like right now on that church's staff. How motivated are the staff to serve their church family? Are they part of the church family? Is the pastor's announcement to his staff a Christlike approach? Has he considered visioning his current staff, providing them with new direction and empowering them to flourish within that new vision? What will happen when the church changes pastors or visions again in a few years?

This area of staffing in the church is where we most often try to live in both models (corporate and church). Our penchant for hiring staff from the four corners of the country is quite unique to the US. Obviously we want to hire men and women of God who are solid in their relationship with him and gifted professionals. But I believe we should guard against two things.

First, are we searching "successful" churches for our staff so we can woo them away from the "competition"? In other words, what is our deepest motivation here? Second, what are we doing to develop strong, gifted leaders in our own church family? Any pastor we hire should demonstrate the qualifications of an elder. We have a great advantage in knowing our own family, but how do we know that a candidate from across the country is above reproach, self-controlled and has a good reputation with outsiders?

#### *Conflict*

In a corporation conflict must be squelched or eliminated because it threatens efficiency and the chain-of-command. The CEO and top-down leadership model minimizes conflict because "one doesn't contradict the CEO!" The CEO's word goes. It's his/her way or the highway! Corporations need not be good at conflict resolution. They simply must eliminate it for efficiency's sake.

The church on the other hand must embrace conflict and deal with it constantly and continuously. Conflict is a given in relationships. Christlikeness teaches us how to effectively deal with conflict and grow in our relationships with each other. Conflict will be present in teamwork as well. The fact that we are to, "Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you" implies that conflict is inevitable and we are to become skilled in dealing with it. (Colossians 3:13 NLT)

#### *Conclusion*

In recent years many large churches have been challenged with organizational issues of a magnitude smaller churches never grapple with. I believe that many of these large

churches have naively turned to a corporate or business model to try to solve their organizational problems. They reasoned, "These strategies have worked well in corporations, so let's implement them in the church."

But as I've attempted to demonstrate briefly above, corporations and churches do not share the same goals and cannot function successfully within the same model. Imagine a corporation implementing the church model in which their goal becomes building relationships, not making money. No employees are expendable. All leadership is shared and servant-based. There are no metrics, simply values. It might be fun to work in such a corporation—until the money runs out! The church model will not work for the corporation! Why would we think the corporate model would work for the church?

What about a very large church with a large paid staff? Aren't we forced to step into a more corporate model where staff like this is involved? To answer that question let me ask, What has changed? What is different with a large staff versus a solo pastor of a small church? There are a number of differences which could be summed up with the word *complexity*. But have the goals, means, values, etc. changed? I trust not! So why impose a corporate model that is inappropriate for the church?

The crux comes down to this: "Christ is the head of the church, which is his body." (Colossians 1:18 NLT) Jesus Christ—no man or woman—is the Head! We, the church must look to our Head, our Leader. How do we do that? It must be through shared leadership. How can I say that? Because shared leadership is relational. A corporate CEO model of leadership is not.

I currently serve in a large church as one of the pastors with administrative duties: all the staff report to me and I have responsibility for the finances, the facility and leadership training. But I'm a member of a leadership *team*. Through prayer we seek God's direction and act when consensus is reached. I cannot begin to count the times when I would've made a dumb decision apart from the interaction and input of the team and our dependence on the Holy Spirit to lead us together. Such shared leadership is holy, reassuring for the church family and spiritually protected.

A strong leader on a church staff often has a bent for efficiency. And we should look for ways to print the church bulletin or check kids in on Sunday morning more efficiently. But when leadership becomes enamored with a corporate model of efficiency, it loses sight of relationships, because relationships are rarely efficient. Relationships get messy and get in the way of efficiency. Christ has called us to *relationships* in the church not *efficiency*. Shared leadership is holy because Christ's people are coming together relationally seeking his mind. In his presence he changes us.

Shared leadership is incredibly reassuring to the church family. When a team of elders, who are enthralled with God and exude Christ's character, spend time praying for God's guidance and he gives them a unanimous decision, the church rests confident in its spiritual leaders and in Christ. In Acts 15 the apostles and elders in Jerusalem met together to discuss a very important issue. After coming to consensus, they wrote a letter to the churches. In that letter they said, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to

us..." What assurance and refreshment the recipients of that letter enjoyed in that statement!

Finally, there is strong spiritual protection in shared leadership. When the leadership at the church of Antioch was worshiping the Lord and fasting, "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" (Acts 13:2) The church knew that this decision was not simply the bright idea of one of its members or the dictate of an overbearing leader. This was a team leadership decision in which the Holy Spirit led the whole team. Imagine the security and confidence that gave Paul and Barnabas as they went out under difficult circumstances and experienced persecution.

The corporate model is a good one—for corporations, but not for a church. Let me leave you with the following out of Ephesians 4:11-16 (NLT):

<sup>11</sup> Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup> This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. <sup>15</sup> Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. <sup>16</sup> He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.