

Part 2- The Importance of Relationships

Written by Calvin Fox

Tuesday, 13 January 2009 11:36 -

I grew up in a family that moved a lot and I was 60 when we moved to Vermont from a city in Massachusetts, after a life time of experience in many churches, in many places. I was not rooted in one town or place all my life. So I was unprepared for a small town where most people had lived all their lives in extended families and had roots and traditions that went way back and way deep. I did not have life long loyalties to a place or a people. I had been an itinerant evangelist beginning in my college days. I had been a church planter and a Pastor in struggling churches that needed revival. I saw this Pastorate in Vermont as a way of serving Christ as I had always done, building up a church that had lost its momentum, and through the church, evangelizing an entire County of almost 30,000 people and on into the world through an active outreach and missions program. This was my vision and I was committed to it one hundred percent. I was convinced that this was God's will and that a church of 250+ with a full program was very feasible. Achieving this was what I was all about. I thought this was what the local members had in mind. It wasn't, it particularly wasn't for the core group, composed of the "people of influence", who were primarily interested in getting a new building and some new people who would help pay for it.

More than anything the people of influence were involved in their extended families and their town. They have a strong sense of community and value longstanding relationships. And they were in no hurry. Church was important, but only as a part of their very full lives. I had only one loyalty, one purpose- a mission to accomplish. I had even thought I would be able to retire after 5 years or so and move back to the City. I think they sensed all of this. I was a very busy, committed Pastor and did everything expected of me according to the by-laws and the "Job Description" we had agreed to. But I think they sensed I was not really one of them. Most of the Pastors in the area had been there a long time, many had grown up there. They were locals with all the relationships that were so important.

I was an "old school" Pastor from the City. The Pastors who served as my models were all strong father types. I thought and planned in terms of goals. I put value on planning, schedules, meetings, and reports. Ironically, the members did too, when it came to running their farms and businesses, but not their church. Church was (and is) about fellowship, relationships and mutual support and sharing among themselves and neighbors. To me growth had to be intentional while to them that would come naturally over time or, at most, through word of mouth and normal relationships. They didn't connect their previous lack of growth to this approach. Neither did the other churches in the County, most of which were maybe 40-60 people. Most folks in the area were content with churches that size. I would never have accepted the call to a church that wanted to stay small. (I candidated at another church in the area after my resignation. They had a nice, historic building and it was fully used. They said they wanted to see their church grow. Great, I said, I could see the potential. I asked them how they planned on accommodating new people and especially new children for Sunday School. They had minimal space for that. Would they enlarge their building or relocate as they grew larger? They were horrified at such thoughts and adamantly said they had no intention to do any such thing. They loved their old building and intended to stay put and make do. I withdrew my name.)

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Our new multi-purpose building could accommodate 250 in the auditorium, but had minimal space for Sunday School, meetings and activities (it was supposed to be Phase One). I believed that we could have reached our capacity. Not only were new people from the area being attracted, but people new to the area, moving there either for work or for the “quality of life” found there (much of it is beautiful resort and vacation country), were also being attracted. It began to occur to the original members that as the church grew it was in danger of losing the small family feel they were comfortable with. The relationships were being threatened and they couldn't do church the same way they had been accustomed too- mostly informal, over the phone or by casual meetings after church. And the people of influence were feeling their power and control being threatened. Growth was not bothering people outside this small core group. Many of them were quite excited about it and willing to work for it. Both new folks beginning to attend as well as people who had grown up in the area wanted it. I had the support of the majority of the members, but not that core group.

A major issue in churches with strong extended family relationships is that people put a great value on unity and getting along, “after all, we live here and we need each other”. Bad memories and grudges go way back but so do friendships and loyalties. People avoid confrontation and conflict. They make excuses for one another. When there are problems within the church family, they are handled like many problems are handled by a families at home. Issues are often not addressed rather than dealing with them, especially in public. This makes for a lot of hypocrisy and cover-ups and that is often condoned in the name of love and peace. This includes issues of sin that a church should not tolerate, particularly in the lives of its leaders or their children. Efforts at church discipline are greatly resisted or resented, even when agreed upon standards are spelled out in Scripture and by-laws.

A Pastor without these local and extended family relationships, coming in from the outside, does not make himself popular if he does not conform to “the way things are done here”. Neither does any one who agrees with the Pastor and comes to his support. Many people will not stand up for a Pastor because they are afraid of what others will say or do if they come to his defense or stand up in a church meeting or even in a committee meeting to agree with him against the people of influence who are opposing him. All this makes sense to locals and is the way things are done in many smaller churches. I greatly underestimated the Rules of Engagement. We have family and many friends, but they are scattered all over the country. We were not part of any local network or community with well established patterns of behavior. Any Pastor considering a new church must make it a point to uncover and understand the relationships and networks in which the members are involved. Christ may be Lord, but these social factors are primary and of great influence. It would help if a candidate is from the same social background. He will have to get involved and slowly build trust and become one of his people. We actually did do that successfully with many people in our last church over 5 years; but not, as it turned out, with the core group of people with influence. I guess we were never one of them and did not have their trust and respect.