

Ecumenical Shared Ministry

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by **David Ray**

During the 17th-century Reformation struggle for religious freedom in Great Britain, Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Numberless struggling churches of every stripe resist encouragement toward unity or cooperation, struggle to hang on to their liberty or autonomy, and are suspicious of anything smacking of charity or sharing. Willingness to consider some form of cooperative ministry is often resisted until all other options are exhausted. What an amazing grace it would be if the economic crisis confronting these churches led them beyond mere survival to unity transcending their liberty and charity in all things via some form of ecumenical sharing.

The way things are is not necessarily the way things have to be or ought to be. The way things are is that most churches would rather be independent and have "our own pastor." Many churches that can no longer maintain their independence would opt for association with a church of their own denomination rather than one of a different tradition. Churches resist combining forces with other churches because they have their own way of doing things. They have their own history and traditions. They fear loss of power and influence. They lack models that illustrate how the various forms of sharing might look and feel. Organizational independence is simpler than creating and maintaining a shared arrangement. As a result, there is no attractive vision of what a future shared ministry and mission might be like.

Denominational bodies have too many times actively or benignly avoided ecumenical sharing ventures, except when church closure is the only alternative. They've preferred to facilitate some form of sharing between churches of their own denomination. What seems to be in the denomination's best interest needs to be weighed against what's in the best interest of the local church and its local community. The faithful witness and effectiveness of a unifying body of Christ in a community ought to take precedence over denominational efficiency and purity.

As one who is a small-church pastor, denominational area minister, and self-confessed "ecumaniac," I see the various forms of ecumenical shared ministry less as last resorts and more as re-emerging models of what God might be seeking to create. As Karl Barth unequivocally asserts in his *Church Dogmatics* (vol. 4, 1: 675), "There is no justification, theological, spiritual, or biblical, for the existence of a plurality of churches genuinely separated in this way and mutually excluding one

another internally and therefore externally... every division as such is a deep riddle, a scandal.”

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are several reasons why some form of shared ministry may provide the most effective and faithful way of maintaining and expanding Christian ministry and mission in many locales. I see these options as particularly advantageous in the upper-Midwest and plains states where rural populations are declining and communities tend to be farther apart. The advantages are:

1. Some form of ecumenical shared ministry is consistent with biblical, historical, and theological visions of the church.
2. By its witness and combined influence, an ecumenical shared ministry can help move a community to greater commonality and cooperation.
3. In the same way that each partner in a marriage brings a reservoir of history, tradition, and understandings to share with the other for the benefit of both, the same is true of churches of different denominational backgrounds that join forces. Rather than denying or forgetting their particular backgrounds, each should prize, draw on, and share their heritage.
4. Where there are limited financial, organizational, and human resources, some form of sharing can compensate for the difficulties and limitations with which each separate church struggles. In particular, a sharing between churches can mean they can afford better, more effective pastoral leadership.
5. Churches of differing denominational connections ought to be able to call on the resources of each denomination to strengthen their shared ministry and mission. And there is the potential of contributing to the strengthening of each denomination.

While the benefits are significant, there are potential dangers and problems:

1. If the sharing is seen as only a marriage of necessity rather than a new opportunity, the participating churches may be satisfied with just getting by and surviving.
2. If the partnering has been a “force fit” rather than a marriage of compatibility, the relationship may remain or grow cool, distant, or hostile.
3. It can be more difficult to find able pastors to serve shared ministries. The result can be an ineffectual or merely maintenance ministry and a short pastoral tenure.
4. If the shared ministry has one pastor serving two or more churches, it can often feel like a bigamous relationship, with all the difficult dynamics that go with multiple spouses.

5. In a culture where the standard for a “real” church has been and is one pastor serving one independent church on a full-time basis, a shared ministry can feel second class or quasi-legitimate to pastor and churches, resulting in serious self-esteem issues.
6. Unless both denominations and churches are sensitive and understanding, an ecumenical shared ministry can result in the churches feeling like they are serving and pacifying two masters.

There are four primary categories of shared ministries, with many variations. A yoke is when two or more churches share a pastor or pastors and perhaps some programming, while maintaining their separate identities and most of their autonomy. A federation is when two or more churches join forces to share pastoral leadership, building, and programming, while maintaining separate allegiances. A larger or cooperative parish is when three or more churches share more than one staff, programming, and resources. A merged church is when two or more churches consolidate their membership, organization, and resources to form one new church. Which of these options is most appropriate or feasible depends on the context, personalities, and other particularities of the situation. Only a wise and sensitive helper can assist churches to seek, find, and implement the shared ministry that is most conducive to their well-being.

Principles

Creating and sustaining a shared ministry is more art than science. Yet there are principles that can help avoid some of the landmines and pitfalls:

1. The potential partners must be compatible. Compatibility is determined by a combination of denominational background, understanding of “church,” church size, congregational self-image, organizational style, world view, and role in the community. It is also determined by intangibles. When the leaders and members are brought together, watch to determine whether they like each other, get along, and have important things in common. If there’s commonality, a shared ministry may work; if there isn’t, it won’t.
2. The local churches’ denominational leadership should be involved throughout the process. They have accumulated wisdom, leadership skills, and resources that are crucial to the success of the sharing.
3. A shared ministry should be customized, not mass produced. Customization takes longer to create but has much better potential for succeeding.
4. Use planning methods that are careful, creative, and collegial. As much as possible, make decisions by consensus not majority rule.
5. Seek, develop, and flesh out a shared, common, and faithful vision that is more than mere survival. Sing the old hymns and learn new ones. Do creative Bible study and preach pregnant scriptures. Get people praying carefully and

expectantly.

6. All the people of both or all the churches need to be included and involved throughout the process. Listen to their fears, work through their anger, honor their ideas, channel their energy, involve them in the new creation. This takes longer and can be “messy.” But if people aren’t brought along, they will be lost along the way.
7. Find elements in their individual traditions and identities that can be appropriated and built upon. Find compatibility and connections in their histories. Keep and use their holy objects. As is done in weddings, find ways to symbolize and ritualize the joining together of separate entities.
8. Tune and test-drive the customized shared ministry before sending it out on its own for the long haul.

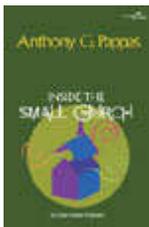
Several years ago I was preaching in a Baptist church in Rwanda. Using the apostle Paul’s image of the body of Christ with its many interdependent organs, I tried to help my hearers visualize and identify with the wider church about which they knew little. At the end of the sermon, I invited the congregation to participate in the ancient Christian custom of passing the peace of Christ. Unfortunately, the missionary translator used the word piece instead of peace. There was much confusion and consternation as people considered how they would pass a piece of Christ!

For much too long and far too often we have lived with and perpetuated a body of Christ in pieces, rather than seeking to build a deep and lasting peace within the body of Christ. Customized versions of ecumenical shared ministries can help us move from a church in pieces to a peace-filled church.

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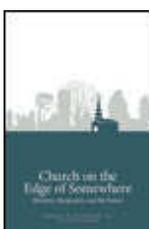
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FEATURED RESOURCES



[Inside the Small Church](#) by Anthony G. Pappas, editor

Small-church expert Tony Pappas has gathered a cornucopia of essays into an indispensable book for anyone interested in the rich life of small congregations. Drawing on classic and updated articles by a variety of writers, and adding new pieces developed especially for this volume, Pappas provides timeless ideas on learning to value, pastor, develop, and lead the small church.



[Church on the Edge of Somewhere: Ministry, Marginality, and the Future](#) by George B. Thompson Jr.

Many congregations today exist in the "middle of anywhere," living comfortably with the surrounding culture and focusing their energies on serving the needs of members. These congregations have many strengths and gifts that they can exercise without changing a thing. But Thompson envisions a deeper, more prophetic call for congregations: a church on the "edge of somewhere," one that is deeply engaged in ministering to the community while calling on others to commit to doing the same.

Alban Weekly, 2008-08-04

Number 210

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