

GOD WON'T MANAGE YOUR CHURCH FOR YOU!

Today's Text: Acts 6: 1- 15

Extracts:

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then *the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* ...And they chose [the seven] whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. *Then the word of God spread* [Acts 6: 1-7]

Early in 2008, Solid Rock Christian Church near Memphis, Tennessee, USA, took a loan of almost \$3 million from the Evangelical Christian Credit Union (ECCU), a financial cooperative society, to construct a new 2,000 seat church for its growing congregation.¹ However, it was unable to complete it and ECCU had to foreclose and put it up for auction. In 2011 alone, 138 churches in America were sold by banks, up from just 24 in 2008 and a handful in the decade before. The problem is reported to be widespread in virtually all denominations of the body of Christ.

On the surface, the growing trend could be due to the economic meltdown since late 2008 that has led to high unemployment and, hence, dwindling contributions from church members. However, the more fundamental issue may have to do with effective management of churches, especially as it is other churches that are buying up the foreclosed premises. The problem is not only in distressed economies; it is all over the world but in varying forms. Was that not why Jesus reminded us that whoever wants to build a tower should first sit down, count the cost and how to fund it before starting [Lk 14: 28-29]? Many of us run with our calling because we believe that God will manage it for us. I wish He would! The reality is that He will not do for you what you can do for yourself! In this week's Bible story, the apostles faced the challenge of how to effectively manage the fledgling church to enable them to concentrate on their calling [Matt. 28: 19-20]. Did they use their knees or their heads? Let us find out from this week's study and learn a few techniques for our own ministries/churches.

¹ Based on Tim Reid, "Banks foreclosing on churches in record numbers," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/09/us-usa-housing-churches-idUSBRE82803120120309>
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1. Background: An administrative structure for a young church

How does it sound when a prosperity- preaching church unexpectedly folds up? Why would a church with a huge and growing congregation suddenly declare bankruptcy? Several factors, spiritual and temporal, may be responsible but, according to an African proverb, when the lizard eats pepper and the frog gets a running stomach, the matter cannot be swept under the carpet! Your place of worship is a house of prayer and it is rare for the pastor (or head) of that church alone to have a monopoly of spiritual gifts because it is the Holy Spirit who distributes such gifts to “each one individually as He wills” [1 Cor. 12: 11]. *Therefore, within a typical congregation, members are called individually as apostles or prophets or evangelists or pastors or teachers* [Eph. 4: 11]. But God is not the author of confusion [1 Cor. 14: 33]! *It will take proper management for all such talents to work together in harmony for the glory of God.* That is the focus of this week’s study.

There is a Barbadian (Caribbean) joke where a man at work was phoned by his neighbour that his house was on fire. The man replied that it could not be true. Asked why not, he replied, “I have the key!” Many young people anxious to pastor a new congregation tend to have the same attitude. They tend to believe that once God has called them to launch a ministry, He has already guaranteed them success. They may well be right or wrong, depending on what they then do to actualize their hopes and aspirations. But *running a church is harder than running a business*. In the case of business, the profit motive guides you to hire and fire workers or choose your value chains as you like. A church, on the other hand, is a voluntary organization that belongs to the body of Christ. *You cannot fire members as you would employees, and success is not defined by the size of your congregation but by how much it serves as God’s house. Nevertheless, the church requires as much administrative attention as any business enterprise* to run effectively for “in a multitude of counsellors, there is safety” [Prov. 24: 6b]. If you do not manage your counsellors properly, you could wind up with a tower of Babel!

Unfortunately, God will not do for you what you can do for yourself. If you doubt it, find out what happened when Jesus came to the grave of Lazarus. The man had been sick, dead and buried. The undertakers were the ones that wrapped up his body, put it in the tomb and rolled a stone across the entrance. When Jesus came to the place, the first question He asked was, “Where have you laid him?” He is God and should know that already! When He came to the site, He said to the people, “Take away the stone.” He could have commanded the stone to be blasted and it would have happened but it was human beings that put the stone there. They did not need God to remove it. Next, Jesus commanded Lazarus to come forth and he arose. Human beings could never do that and Jesus did it for them. But the risen Lazarus was still tied up. Jesus said, “Loose him, and let him go” [Jn 11: 28-44]. It was the undertakers, not God that had tied him up! Therefore,

God will not do for you what you can do for yourself. What you can do for yourself is what He has already empowered you to use, such as free will [**Gen. 2: 15-20**], natural talents [**Ex. 31: 1-6**] and a sound mind [**2 Tim. 1: 7**]. When you commit your works to the Lord, He will establish your thoughts [**Prov. 16: 3**].

The apostles understood that principle and followed it to establish an effective administrative structure for the church that was beginning to take shape. Let us pay attention to the story as follows”

a) There was a felt need for effective administration

As the number of disciples multiplied, there was a complaint against the Jews by the Gentiles “because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” [**Acts 6: 1**]. In other words, there were *charges of favouritism or nepotism* against the Jewish disciples who might have felt superior to the Gentiles, since Jesus and all the apostles were of Jewish descent.

There is a familiar ring to that in our congregations today. Before you know it, the family and ethnic relations of the founder or pastor wear a superiority complex and make an entitlement claim to the top positions and largesse of the congregation. The misbehavior of such members is either condoned or not reprimanded. Yet, rules and regulations are strictly applied where others are affected. Such practices are bound to breed discontent and disharmony within the congregation.

b) The apostles were committed to action

The twelve apostles quickly recognized the felt need for an effective administration. So, they summoned the multitude of the disciples and said to them, “It is not desirable that we should leave the work of God and serve tables” [**v.2**]. Serving tables here means administrative duties. The work of God is Christ’s commission to them to spread the gospel first to all Judea and Samaria, and to “the end of the earth” [**Acts 1: 8**]. They recognized that it would amount to work overload should they combine spiritual work with administrative chores.

For fear of losing control, some founders or pastors are scared to share their work with those who can help them to grow. To some extent, they are right because there are some subordinates who just want an apprenticeship opportunity to launch their own ministries. Nevertheless, you need help and you should recognize that. The apostles did.

c) The selection criteria were clear and unambiguous

The apostles delegated the selection to the rest of the disciples but set for them the selection criteria. They said to them, “Seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business” [Acts 6: 3]. The word of God says, “Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches” [Prov. 24: 3-4]. The apostles were Spirit-led in setting those criteria and whoever could meet them would certainly be Spirit-filled.

Again we have a problem with the modern church. When you see the kind of people that would emerge from such a selection process, they would be cronies and ‘yes-men’ whose main job would be to preserve unquestioning loyalty to the pastor. They may not even have administrative skills or experience, nor do they command respect on account of their integrity or spirituality. ***When you reward loyalty over competence and integrity, you get a dinosaur church on the way to its extinction!***

d) *The administrators were duly sworn into office*

When the disciples applied the criteria, they selected seven deacons, one of whom was Stephen, “a man of faith and the Holy Spirit” [Acts 6: 5]. Another of the seven was Philip, the man that would later baptize the treasurer to Candace the queen of Ethiopia; he thus helped in first spreading the gospel to Africa [Acts 8: 26-40]. The seven were set before the apostles who, after praying, laid hands on them [Acts 6: 6]. That way, the seven deacons were duly sworn in and thus given a seal of spiritual authority.

When you do things right, you give yourself a good lead on your administrative challenges. There were no more reported charges of nepotism or discrimination among the disciples. They participated in the selection process; they owned the outcome, and you can be sure they gladly accepted the new structure.

e) *It made a great impact on the church*

The immediate impact was that “the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and ***a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith***” [v. 7]. The apostles achieved both their spiritual and administrative objectives. The word of God spread and the number of the disciples greatly multiplied. That was what the apostles concentrated on. A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. The seven deacons ensured that their subordinates kept in line. That was the purpose of their appointment. God became the winner!

From the foregoing, we can conclude that *good administration alone may not guarantee you success but it promotes the success of your calling to pastor a congregation.* What lessons can you now take on board?

2. Lessons for managing your situation

The following important lessons need to be learnt:

a) *Know your limits and empower others to assist you!*

Sometimes, we get carried away to think that we can manage everything by ourselves. Is that possible? A pastor may have his family. A Catholic priest who is celibate may have parents and siblings to cater for. There are pressures on you- some strategic (the future direction of your church), some tactical (the way to do specific things right now or in the near future). There are bills to pay and you need to ensure that money is available on hand or in the bank to cover them. Some members of your congregation may have pressing needs that you cannot ignore. In the end, you may wind up with role overload (too much to do at once) or role ambiguity (not knowing what to do)! ***The starting point is to recognize that you cannot manage the church alone. You need capable help.***

Moses could speak with God face-to-face [Num. 12; 8]. Yet, when he struggled to control the millions of the children of Israel that he was leading to the Promised Land, at no time did God teach him how to do it, even when their stiff-neckedness worsened Moses' anger level! It was only when Jethro, his father-in-law, brought his sons and his wife to join him in the wilderness that Moses' eyes were opened to his own limits. He judged the people from morning to evening and did not have time for his own family. Jethro gave him "wise counsel" on principles of delegation. Moses would be set free to deal with "every great matter" while "every small matter" would be judged by his subordinates, the rulers of thousands and hundreds (the exception principle). Jethro concluded, "If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace." We are told, "Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said" [Ex. 18: 13-27]. Did he not become the better for it?

b) *Operate on the basis of authority, not power!*

Sometimes, we may claim to have a team and that we have delegated responsibilities to subordinates. Yet, we remain empire builders- keeping a tight rein on everything that goes on. Even where there are well-documented operating rules and procedures, you only follow them if they hurt your enemies (those telling you the truth) or benefit your friends (your crony loyalists). You do not respect your superiors in the church

hierarchy; yet, you expect all those below you to fall in line behind you. You do not care about the welfare of your staff but you are wearing the latest fashions and flying the latest jets. Such conduct can only arise because you are not subject to authority.

When the disciples began to debate among themselves who was the greatest, Jesus reminded them that they called Him Lord and they were right. Yet, He was among them as the one who served [Lk 22: 24-27]. That is leadership humility that you may seriously consider. If you are unfaithful in what belongs to others, who will give you your own [Lk 16: 12]?

c) Let God get the accolade!

When success comes from operating a successful ministry, defined as “the word of God grew ... and a great many [church officers and members] were obedient to the faith,” you should give the glory to God, not to your ministry. It is not an occasion to buy more TBN time to show the world why everybody should now come to your church. Rather, let those who have seen the glory of God by your ministry go and tell others what the Lord has done for them. Let God get the accolade!

When the seventy disciples that Jesus had sent out two by two came back to testify that even the demons were subject to them in His name, He first assured them that their names were written in heaven. Then, He rejoiced in the Spirit and said, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” [Lk 10: 1-22]. He gave the glory to His Father.

3. Conclusion: Learn from the Master Himself!

Jesus was given all authority both in heaven and on earth [Matt. 28: 18]. Yet, when it came to building an administrative structure for His salvation ministry, He used human methods. He selected twelve apostles and one of them, Judas Iscariot, was a thief [Jn 12: 6]! He sent out seventy disciples “two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go.” He taught them what to take, how to behave, and what tasks to perform [1-6]. By the time He left them to return to heaven, His disciples knew what to do, part of which is what we have just seen in this study. Above all, Jesus showed His disciples the significance of the Holy Spirit who will always guide them “into all truth” [Jn 16: 13].

God will not manage your church for you.