

Making Great Decisions

You will be faced with hundreds of choices. Here's how to make the best ones.

Lyle Schaller | posted 8/22/2007

It is important for you to understand what criteria you and your fellow board members will use to make decisions.

Power of the Past

The most obvious and frequently the most influential reference point in decision-making is precedent. What did we do last year? Did anyone complain about that? If not, the past can legitimize the future.

For example, the pastor may tell the board he plans to take two weeks of vacation in August. When a new board member questions that, the pastor replies, "That's the schedule I've followed every year since I came here." Everyone appears satisfied.

In many communities, someone should ask, "My impression is that July, August, and early September are the peak church-shopping months for newcomers to this community. Do you think it's wise for our minister to be out of the pulpit for two Sundays when our number-one goal is to grow? Would it be possible to move those two weeks in the summer to June?"

The usual answer is, "No, the number-one criterion in scheduling vacations is the convenience of the staff; number two is local tradition."

Two Sets of Questions

The way in which board members ask questions can influence the decision-making process. Compare these two sets of questions that may be criteria for board members.

Set A

What did we do last year?

What will our older members think?

Is it consistent with our local traditions?

Is it compatible with the design of our building?

What does our pastor prefer?

Can we get a majority of our members to support this?

Will it be asking too much of our people?

How much will it cost?

We tried it in the church I was in before, and it didn't work. What makes you think it will work here?

Will it place too much of a burden on our pastor?
Can we secure the necessary approval from our denominational headquarters?
Will it require adding another staff person to the payroll?

Set B

How will it improve the quality of our ministry?
How will it expand our capability to reach the younger generations?
How would a first-time visitor respond to this?
How will it enrich the spiritual journeys of our members?
How will it strengthen our ministry with single-parent families?
How will it enhance our teaching ministries?
Will it really challenge the commitment level of our people?
Are you suggesting we try to do yesterday again, only better?
Which change should we introduce first and which one should come later?
How will the leaders in the year 2030 evaluate our response to this issue?
How will it enrich our ministries to families with young children?
How will this glorify God?

Who Chooses the Criteria?

Who decides on the criteria that will guide the decision-making process?

In smaller congregations the answer often is a mix of (a) local traditions and precedents, (b) respected and influential veteran leaders, (c) building and property constraints, and (d) comparative dollar costs.

In larger congregations the criteria frequently originate in (a) the senior minister and/or program staff, or (b) books, workshops, and visiting experts.

In middle-sized congregations the criteria are more likely to be articulated by the pastor and/or board members.

Regardless of how your criteria are chosen, it is important to answer these questions: Which criteria does our board use? Which criteria would improve the governance system in our congregation?

Copyright © 1997 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared in Renewing Your Church Through Vision and Planning (Bethany House).