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WHAT ARE CHOICE POINTS?

The term “choice points” is not an uncommon term. It’s used by computer programmers to indicate a point on a software decision tree. It’s used by educators to identify points at which implementation decisions are made. Sociologist Thomas F. O’Dea used the term to tell people who study religious groups that we would do better in trying to understand why movements become bureaucratic institutions if we could identify “dilemmas or choice points which give rise to one kind of organizational tendency rather than another.”¹ Sociologist J. Alan Winter identified “dimensions or choice-points facing religious congregations” as they maintain or change their nature.² He included issues like

- Membership by birth vs. membership by profession of faith;
- High vs. low member involvement;
- Professional clergy vs. priesthood of all believers;
- Conforming to society vs. tension with society;
- Focus on the masses vs. the classes.³

Kenneth E. Crow, a sociologist and also a pastor, missionary, educator, administrator, and now denominational researcher, uses the term to describe

a major area of decision, an issue with significant consequences—even though congregational or denomina-

tional leaders would not necessarily recognize the significance or consequences. . . . Decisions made around a choice point (or around the significant issue, or in the significant area) might be conscious and formal, but they are very often not. We seem to drift into decisions [that take us] away from our denominational roots and original mission and may be making us less likely to reach the unreachable people.⁴

Dr. Crow suggests *congregation size* is one of the major choice points congregations face. Sometimes the choice point regarding size comes in the *context* of other issues or dilemmas and often in *contrast* to the more routine decisions congregations make. The decision regarding congregational size may be made unconsciously and will tend to become part of the congregational culture. It will not be casually or easily changed. If for some reason the congregation is forced to reconsider its decision because of a demographic change or church crisis or some similar event, the decision may be reaffirmed or changed. If the decision is reaffirmed, another layer is added to the culture of the congregation; if the decision is changed, the history of the church takes another direction.

People may make decisions regarding congregation size that are not overt, formal decisions. In fact, most are informal decisions and sometimes unconscious ones. Interestingly, the conclusions are widely accepted and firmly held. Once these decisions are made, congregations appear to cycle up and down within the size range allowed by the organizational issues of the choice point. These decisions tend to prevent losses that would cause them to decline below the chosen range, and they resist additions that would move them significantly above that range.

The congregation size choice point is of great significance because of the implications of the Great Commission. Christ's commission is binding on all Christians and all Christian congregations. It is not possible for a congregation to obey the Great Commission without facing the issue of church size. It may decide to break through the 200 barrier, or it may decide to remain the same size and sponsor a new church periodically. Either decision involves obedience to the Great Commission.⁵

Dr. Crow's way of thinking about church size may prove to be a breakthrough in church growth theory, for it provides a way for churches to understand how choice points, perhaps even more than pastoral leadership and/or organizational structures, determine the size of their congregation. It would be helpful in many churches to be able to bring to the surface the latent existing decisions about size. It would make possible the development of more comprehensive and effective strategies for breaking the 200 barrier. Undoubtedly, thousands of congregations would reverse their decisions and make new ones to break through the 200 barrier and win hundreds of people in their communities to Christ.

It may be an over-simplification to state that choice points, as we use the term, may be *occasions when people make decisions about factors that determine their congregation size*. Even so, this concise definition may enable us to readily work through the complexity of determinants of church size.

Choice points may be *points in time* when a formal or informal, and sometimes unconscious, decision is made regarding a value, preference, attitude, or response. Sometimes these choice points are marked by an *opportunity*, like a rapid population increase in the community. A *crisis*, like the church building burning, may confront the congregation with

a decision of whether to relocate to reach a younger community or simply rebuild in the same location to preserve a valued tradition. Choice points may also come from *events*, such as the success of a community program. Instinctive responses in these situations often become decisions with long-term consequences. They add another layer of assumptions to the history and culture of the congregation.

Choice points arise around *issues*. The need to hire additional staff may press the congregation to think about the kind of financial responsibility they want to assume or the kind of relationship with the pastor they want to preserve. A community need may challenge the church to decide whether they will be outwardly focused or inwardly preoccupied. Failure to respond to the need will, in fact, be a decision in favor of continuing as an inwardly focused fellowship.

Congregations face choices fairly consistently regarding matters of *preference*. Musical taste, style of worship, emotional comfort, décor and color preference, and exposure or anonymity frequently become points in which subtle decisions are made that both form and express a congregational personality.

Challenge and risk also force choice points on congregations. Is the congregation willing to grow, accept new people, build a larger building, or even relocate? How heavy of a financial responsibility is the congregation willing to assume? Are the people willing to attempt a worthwhile community project that might fail and embarrass them with their non-church friends? Is the culture of the congregation to always “play it safe”?

These descriptions only begin to sketch out the dimensions of congregational beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, and preferences. Every choice point in one way or another challenges these factors of congregational life and personali-

ty. In the next chapter we will consider some common dilemmas or tensions that call for decisions that tend to determine congregation size.