



Is Merger or Adoption in the Future of These Four Congregations

This past Monday night representatives of four congregations in CMBA met together for a meal, a presentation, and some dialogue about the possibility of merging, allowing one of the congregations to adopt them, or a combination of both. All four congregations are in the same area of the association. All four have a high percentage of senior adults.

All four risk no longer being in existence within the next few years, or at least within the next ten years. As the lay leader of one congregation says about their church, “We have an expiration date.”

For these congregations, decline in attendance is their pattern. None of the four have the essential leadership capacity to develop sustainable strategies for long-term vitality and vibrancy. That is, at least alone. Their best days might be behind them as individual congregations.

Together they have the potential to move forward with spiritual and strategic energy, embolden by God’s empowering vision for their future, and to develop a great congregation. Together their best days might be in front of them.

These congregations are composed of persons of worth created in the image of God. Wonderful people make up the membership of these congregations. They have a heritage of which they can be proud. Through their current dialogue, they have hope for a future filled with promise.

During July, these representatives will be in dialogue and prayer with the congregations they represent. By early August, each congregation is asked to indicate one of three things:

- First, they would like to go forward in partnership with other congregations to craft a God-empowered strategy for a merged congregation.
- Second, they would like to be adopted once the merged congregation is formed but do not need to take part in developing the God empowered strategy.
- Third, they do not feel led by God to continue with the dialogue, but they would like CMBA to continue talking with them about other possible choices for their future.

Would you pray for these congregations that the decision they make over the next five weeks will be one that is clearly God’s leading for them and not something less? Merger or adoption will only be successful if God is in it. Their most important task is to discern the leadership of God rather than the leadership of men and women. The decision must be made on the basis that each congregation is God’s church and not their church. That is hard for many people to understand.

What Will Hasten the Expiration Date of These Congregations

We cannot declare or say that we know the will of God for any of these congregations concerning merger or adoption. We can share, based on our decades of experience, what tends to happen to congregations unwilling to make significant changes in times of decreased vitality and vibrancy brought about by decline, insufficient leadership, fragile finances dependent on people whose support may disappear, and facilities with current or pending major expenses.

Here are ten things that tend to happen to congregations as they approach their expiration date. How many of these are true for your church?

1. They are fueled by management leaders and processes, the traditions of their church, and the desire to survive.
2. They have few or no expectations that people are growing spiritually as disciples, as they fear if they put these expectations on them, they will leave the church.
3. The average age of the active congregation is over 65 years old.
4. The average length of membership of the active congregation is more than 25 years.
5. Relationships within the congregation are primarily about true friendship with one another and little or no relationships within the community context.
6. Annually the church is not adding many members or participants, and have more people become inactive transferring to other churches, and deaths than additions to the active membership.
7. Weekly attendance has declined at least 10 percent during the past five years.
8. More than 80 percent of the church budget goes to pay the direct and indirect costs of the pastor, staff, facilities, and debt.
9. The church has overwhelming and burdening debt for their buildings and/or other areas of ministry.
10. The church buildings are in disrepair, and the church must address major retrofitting and replacement or abandon parts of the buildings.

CMBA has an inventory that helps churches have dialogue around these ten issues. If you would like to receive a copy of this inventory – *Will Your Congregation Still Exist Ten Years from Now?* – send a request to CMBA@ColumbiaMetro.org or call George Bullard at 803.622.0923.