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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How Do We Successfully Launch a New Project?

Jack and his wife, Susan, know that when they buy a “Some Assembly Required” product, trouble lies ahead:

●As a classic *planner*, Jack always places the contents of the box in alphabetical order on the floor and reads the assembling instructions from beginning to end. Only then, does he pick up the first part and start the assembly process.

●Susan, always anxious to get the job done quickly, uses a different strategy—the *dump, then jump*, approach. Susan turns the box upside down, spilling the contents on the floor. With a quick glance at the picture on the box, she starts assembling.

Do those two types of people also play roles in launching a new project in churches? Are some lay leaders classic planners—working alongside other leaders who prefer the dump-and-jump method?

Second Avenue Community Church is a small congregation with an average worship attendance of eighty-five. The church recently called a new part-time pastor, after several years of struggle without a pastor. The lay leaders hope for an up-tick in worship attendance.

The congregation currently has two adult church school classes. At a governing board meeting, the new pastor floats the idea of starting a new adult Sunday school class.

The board members hear this as a good idea. They feel that having a new pastor may help their church to engage new people in Christian education. But the board meeting flounders as the group begins discussing how to accomplish this. Some want to do it one way; others think another way is better.

How to avoid launch failure: Governing boards and committees that ask and answer the following seven questions can avoid conflicts resulting from the *planner* versus *dump and jump* procedures.¹

1. What is the purpose of this project? Any new initiative requires clarity about why this activity is a good investment of everyone’s time and energy. The project’s purpose typically addresses a need or problem, a new issue or question, or an opportunity.

At its next governing board meeting, Second Avenue’s board chair reopens the new-adult-class discussion by suggesting that the arrival of a new pastor presents an

opportunity for several additional members who do not presently attend an adult class.

The board chair goes on to explain that a new adult class would serve several purposes: (a) provide a small, caring group and Christian education for several members and (b) give the new pastor a chance to get acquainted with those individuals—while (c) respecting the solid relationship bonds among people in the two already existing adult classes.²

2. What do we need to know to begin the project?

To plan wisely means to read the instructions. How can the experiences of other churches inform us? What congregations could we talk with to (a) get ideas and (b) gain guidance regarding how to avoid the sand traps that lurk in the shadows, waiting to stifle good intentions?

Research shows that adult church school attendance is a key indicator of congregational vitality. Strong churches engage large percentages of their worshipers in Christian education. As a result, those attendees are more likely to (a) grow in discipleship and spiritual maturity and (b) give more in time, talent, and money to their church and community.



“Do you suppose we should have done more advance planning?”

The board chair and the pastor expect some resistance from the existing adult classes, expressed in remarks such as, “Why start a new class? We’d like to have those new people in our class!”

So, to preempt that response, the board chair and the pastor point out two facts: (a) younger adults and new members are much more likely to join a completely new class than a class that has already celebrated its twentieth anniversary and (b) healthy, effective churches often start one or two new classes each year.

The pastor communicates from experience that new people are more likely to become involved in an adult class when at least three people personally and warmly invite them—the pastor (or other ministry staff in a larger church) and two current members.

The last piece of wisdom the pastor and board chair share with the governing board relates to class content. Good topics make a good fit with potential class members’ life questions and preferences. A skillful adult class leader maintains a balance between Biblical or theological studies, practical applications, and personal self-reflection.

3. What do we need to make it happen? After an animated discussion with the “no plan is a good plan” contingent, the pastor addresses the myth of “we just need to use the right curriculum.” Those who subscribe to this theory believe that if you just use the right study material, the new class will succeed. Not so! Success depends on starting with (a) the right people, (a) the right day and time, and (c) the right meeting space.

For a large majority of worshipers, the right time is Sunday morning. But with a few demographic-specific groups—for example, young, single adults—a weekday evening may work. The first meeting of the new class is widely announced in at least three ways—during services, in the newsletter, on the church’s website, and with phone calls to prospective attendees. The new pastor reminds the board that an adult new-member class can sometimes evolve into a new adult class.

4. What action steps do we take? Thinking and talking about a project is not the same thing as *doing* a project. To avoid the tendency to talk a good idea to death, set a deadline for the project launch. Before taking the first action, outline each step: What is step one? Step two? Step three? Make assignments to named individuals who will carry out each step.

5. What would success look like? Defining success in advance is more important than anxiously fearing failure. Would ten adults participating in the new class spell success for Second Avenue? On the other hand, leaders could aim for a goal of committed participation by four couples during the first eight weeks. Target goals help focus efforts and stamp out the illusion that good projects happen by accident.

Not all new projects succeed. But efforts that fail can provide opportunities to learn, revise, and try again. Who will be responsible for assessing whether this project

worked? Accountability and yearly evaluation procedures also keep a new project sharply focused.

6. What are our greatest hopes? What do we imagine as this project’s ideal impact? For every church, new initiatives remind us that we are not alone in our efforts. As a project unfolds, the question of “How do we see God working among us?” allows us to experience the incarnational in our work together. We hope that lives are changed and that the church itself is changed—moving ever closer to its core purpose.

7. How does this project fit into the bigger picture? Our greatest hopes for the new adult church school class, or any other project, point to the reasons for which the church exists. What do our projects say about our church and our mission? The greater the clarity church leaders have on these “whys,” the greater the congregation’s vitality.

How are project planning and strategic planning different? These seven planning questions for a successful new project differ from a strategic planning effort. Strategic planning focuses on big-picture questions, such as “Who are we as a congregation?” “What has God called us to do?” “Who is our neighbor?”

Strategic planning uses a wide-focus lens that addresses the organization’s general goals over the next three-to-five years. Second Avenue Community Church created a strategic plan as part of its new pastor call process. Its new adult class project is just *one slice* of that much larger whole-church pie.

The bottom line: Church projects come in all shapes and complexities—from updating nursery facilities, to hiring new staff, to fixing a leaky roof. Most projects come without instructions and require church leaders to assemble information themselves—prior to launch.

When church members take on a “Some Assembly Required” project, the two types of leader—planners and jumpers—make good team members. One leadership style keeps others from planning without taking action. The other leadership style keeps others from taking action without planning.

When the different leader styles—whether a vision of the completed project or a grasp of the steps needed to arrive there—are coordinated, success happens.

¹ These questions are adapted from Kathleen A. Cahalan’s *Projects That Matter: Successful Planning and Evaluation for Religious Organizations* (The Alban Institute, 2003), which provides guidelines for planning and evaluating projects.

² Download, free of charge, a more detailed set of how-to steps for increasing adult Sunday school class attendance and starting new classes, titled *Church Effectiveness Nuggets, Volume 11*, from the “Free Resources” section of the www.TheParishPaper.com Website.