

Seven Deal-Breaker Questions When Considering a Church Merger

by Jim Fuller, PCI executive director

Before the details of your church merger have been worked out, people in your community will somehow find out. The news will spread quickly even if much of the information people are sharing is incorrect or premature.

Imagine how the members of both churches will feel when they hear about the merger on the community grapevine rather than from their own pastors and church leaders. Meanwhile, your merger is being discussed throughout the community, with everyone weighing in with their positive and/or negative comments about one or both churches.

Church leaders considering a merger must be careful to prevent premature talk and gossip. Little foxes spoil the vine, the Bible warns. Loose talk by your members or local citizens may turn your proposed merger into a lead balloon rather than the exciting step forward in God's work that you want it to be.

Therefore, during the initial brainstorming about a possible church merger, keep the discussion to a few trusted members. However, don't be naïve enough to expect such a big decision to stay secret for long. Wisdom, planning, public relations skills, quick action and lots of prayer are all vital to making your church merger a success.

Some Deal-Breaker Questions

Why stir up your congregations and the community about a proposed merger that is ultimately never going to happen? When pastors and church leaders have their initial discussions about a possible merger, it may quickly become apparent that a merger is not even feasible.

Some leaders explore a church merger as if they are in a courtship; they end up dragging out the discussions for months, only to hit upon key issues far down the line that derail the merger talks. Why go through all of that?

As soon as a merger is being seriously considered, pastors and church leaders of both churches should candidly discuss the questions below to determine if a merger is even a possibility. When a proposed merger falls through, it is usually because of one of these seven "dealbreaker" topics. By talking through these questions, you may quickly discover that a merger just isn't going to work out.

Seven Deal-Breaker Questions for a Possible Church Merger

1. What is the bottom-line reason for the proposed merger? What is the rationale to be presented to members and the public? Are finances the reason? It is a sign of desperation when financial need is the driving force behind your merger proposal. A healthy church merger is one that is conceived to expand the two churches' outreach to the lost.
2. How well will the two congregations get along? Do they have a similar composition and culture, or are they significantly different? If the two congregations do not make a good match, your merger will face difficulties.

When the congregations in a merger do not mix well, some members from one or both churches may be lost in the transition. More than once I have seen a church merger that ended up with a congregation that had no more people than either of the original churches had. What was gained by that merger?

3. Which church building will the merged church use? Is that building able and ready to handle a larger congregation? How will members of the displaced congregation respond to the "new" facility? How many members of the displaced congregation will have to drive a greater distance to the new facility? How many members of the displaced congregation will be lost due to the longer drive?
4. After the merger, what will become of the building(s) no longer in use? Will it be sold? How will the proceeds be used? Do the members of the church that owns that building support those plans? Will they feel hurt, perhaps even cheated?

An argument over the proceeds of a building sale can cause bigger problems than the problems the merger was supposed to solve. These days it is not unheard of for church disputes to lead to legal action. You don't want that. When a lawsuit is filed, it is usually because someone believes something fundamentally unfair has occurred.

One way to avoid such feelings is to hold the proceeds in the bank until the merged church is progressing smoothly. If the merger is unsuccessful, members of the former church may consider using the funds to restart their closed church. (And if holding the money is a deal-breaker because the other church is so eager to access the funds, the members' suspicions may be justified.)

5. Will the two pastors serve as equal co-leaders? How will they make decisions together? Will each pastor have veto power over the other's initiatives? Will that prevent bold, faith-based actions? Are both pastors humble enough to submit to each other? Will the merger create a two-headed monster?

How will the congregation respond to having co-pastors? Is that an idea your church members are prepared to support?

6. Will the two pastors share traditional pastoral roles? Or will the pastors work out a strategic division of duties that acknowledges their respective strengths and weaknesses? For example, who will do hospital visitation? Will the two pastors share such duties equally? Will each pastor continue to serve the members of his/her previous church? Will that promote division rather than unity? How will pastoral care of new members be handled?

7. What will be the style of worship and music of the merged church? Who will lead the music? Will the style be a significant change for either congregation? How many members will likely be lost due to this significant change?

Additional Important Questions about a Church Merger

1. What will be the name of the merged church?

2. What will be the mission statement, vision, goals and objectives of the merged church?

3. Have the two pastors shared their visions, goals and ministry philosophies with each other? Will the merger help both pastors better fulfill their goals? A good pastor pursues the ministry according to one's gifting and calling. If a merger forces a pastor into a role that is outside his/her gifts and calling, that can cause frustration and failure.

4. Will one pastor assume an associate role under the leadership of the other pastor? Will that pastor be satisfied in an associate role? Will that pastor's congregation accept him/her as an associate and accept the other pastor as the lead?

5. Will both pastors receive equal or better income from the merged church than their current incomes? Will either pastor receive more income than the other?

6. Will there be an agreement that both pastors remain in their positions for a set time period, to ensure stability during the transition time?

7. How do the pastors' spouses feel about the proposed merger? Never underestimate the influence of a pastor's spouse. In the case of a church merger, you are dealing with the feelings and opinions of two pastors' spouses! What roles will the spouses have in the merged church? Can the spouses work together?

8. Which lay leaders will form your merged church's board or leadership council? Who will serve as chair of the church board or leadership team? Will either church have greater representation among the leadership? What policies, practices and rules of order will the new leadership be guided by?

9. How will the merger affect the many volunteer workers of both churches? Some valuable workers may see the merger as an opportunity to take a break and let someone from the other church take over. However, if key workers from both congregations take that attitude, it may result in the merged church having the same number or even fewer trained workers than the number of workers the two churches had before the merge.

Some ministry leaders and department heads have been serving in the same role for years. Some such workers have a territorial attitude about their ministries and may be profoundly affected by a merger. Will you end up losing them?

Some Other Tips Regarding a Possible Church Merger

1. If working through the above questions raises too many negatives, it may mean that you should discontinue further talk of a merger. A successful church merger is difficult to accomplish under any circumstances. It must be a win-win situation for everyone involved, or it is likely that nobody will come out a winner.
2. If you decide to move forward with the merge, make a detailed plan of how you will proceed. What are the many necessary steps before and after the merger? What is a reasonable timetable? Who will be responsible for each step? A business executive with experience in project management may be a big help in developing such a plan. I can't overemphasize the importance of planning!
3. You may consider bringing in a coach who has experience with church mergers to help both churches think through these issues objectively. The coach's ongoing input may also be invaluable during execution of the merger plan.
4. How will you bring unity to the members of your merged churches? What strategies will you use to help the people get acquainted with each other? Have a church dinner at which each person is seated next to people from the other church. Have everyone wear name tags. Have people stand and introduce themselves.
5. How will disagreements be settled? During the first months of a merged congregation, many conflicts will arise. How will they be resolved? Is the resolution process tilted in favor of one of the former churches? Will that drive members of the other church to ultimately leave?
6. Make sure all of your discussions about the merger are immersed in prayer. Prayer changes things and prayer changes people. There is power in prayer and there is power in numbers. No church wants the devil to have any stronghold in the discussion and decision process about a church merger.

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