

Ideas on Mergers

Many churches across America have attempted mergers. Some will justify the merger for financial reasons, others seem to view it as having a way to increase the workers in the church, and some will boldly state that two churches can join together, showing unity to others in the community to provide a greater thrust for evangelism.

If the truth be known, most mergers are unsuccessful due to a lack of planning and communication. There are a number of considerations that need to be examined before action is taken. Christians have been wounded and discouraged due to misunderstandings and misconceptions of what the merger will eventually end up being.

If you are thinking about merging with another church, there is a great deal of prayer and planning needed before final decisions are made. Listed below are considerations that have been helpful in your process. Again, few mergers have been successful. Those who are successful gave ample time in planning, praying, and preparing.

1. Time is of the essence, no such thing as secrets.

Before all the details and discussions of a possible merge have been worked out, people in the community will somehow find out. They will be sharing this information with almost anyone, expecting and sharing information as if it is true and making positive/negative comments about one or both of the churches. If the churches are not careful, members may leave their church because they are disappointed about hearing details of a merge before their church has released information to them. During this time of chaos, churches have to run in high gear to prevent any wrong information from hurting or damaging others. Planning, foresight, prayer, and wisdom are vitally needed to prevent any vain or wasted motion from taking away the possible excitement of merging. Be careful to keep any possible brainstorming or planning of a merger to a few trusted members. First and utmost is exploring whether or not both administrations can work together with all details worked out before such a plan is implemented.

2. Can the pastors work together?

Both pastors have to come together with objective and forthright questions that will explore and examine any possible or potential problem that might exist if this venture is to continue in the processing and planning stage. The Bible speaks of wisdom and it also points out that the little foxes spoil the vine. All planning, large or small, must be worked out before talking to the churches and denominations. If things cannot be worked out, why go through all of the wasted motion and energy to get everyone stirred up. Please don't get "the cart before the horse". You may want to explore some of these questions:

- a. What will the head of the church look like?
- b. Can the church legally operate with a two-pastor operation?

- c. If not, how are the pastorate roles handled? How can a newly formed church body be handled by two pastors? Can it be equal or does one assume an associate role?
- d. What roles or schedules will each pastor assume/fill?
- e. Anticipate possible problems, such as, if one role is to visit the sick in the hospital and a member wants he/she “other” pastor. Do you both go? Do the pastors only visit their old membership and if so, does that bring about unity? What about new members, which pastor fills that role in visitation?
- f. Who is the chairman of the board?
- g. How is the board run? Does one combine both boards for a period of time? How does that newly formed board agree with any combined mission statement or vision? Are they living and breathing unity or are they showing favoritism towards certain people?
- h. Is there going to be new vision, objectives, and goals drawn up by merging boards and leadership?
- i. Will there be a new name change or keep one of the names of the churches in tact. Who decides which name applies to the new church body?
- j. In which church building will the new body worship in? What happens to the other building that was once occupied by the other church? Will both church bodies look at a neutral building?
- k. Will pastors have equal vote or representation?
- l. Will both pastors have their needs met? Financially, will they be able to have equal to or better incomes than before?
- m. Will there be an agreement that both pastors will remain in employment and position for a set number of years?
- n. What is the style of worship? What if they have different worship styles?
- o. What about the music? Who is going to lead the music?
- p. How are the differences going to be settled? Too many pastors “assume” they can get along by saying, “Oh, that’s no problem or we can work together” without looking at differences objectively and honestly. Too many times people push things aside, only to find out that these small divisions will lead huge feelings of hurt, resentment, invalidation, and if not resolved, bringing hopelessness.
- q. What if a problem arises with a member, who is going to take care of it? Will there be joint discussion or can either one have the discretion to handle it and inform the other one of the results? What if the problem concerns someone from the other church? How are the pastors/boards going to stand on issues in front and away from the pulpit?
- r. If church assumes a co-pastor role, both pastors must have humility, which sometimes is difficult for pastors because of the insecurities and egos that many pastors have. Many pastors have “drive” to see things accomplished “as they see it”, without consulting with the other pastor. Many pastors are used to making decisions on their own and have difficulty in sharing or submitting to another. Some are unwilling to change or submit to the other one. Sometimes two heads create a two-headed monster.
- s. What if a pastor continues to “run over” the other one or gets his way consistently? Is there any recourse or does that pastor just “suck it up” and try to deal with his hurts and invalidation? Talk is cheap. Actions are much louder than words. Pastors and leaders need to explore and examine

themselves—if there are too many negatives to any such merger, why get involved in all the headaches the merger will cause. A merger must be a win-win situation for everyone!

- t. What roles will the spouses have? Will the congregation still address them as pastor's spouse? Can the spouses work together? Will their talents be used or overridden? Can both families get along together? Will you spend quality time inside and outside of the church? It is very unrealistic that people will get along if they never spend time together.
- u. Have you shared your goals and visions with each other, spouse, and family?
- v. What about the sale of any property? How will it be handled? If it is to be used to immediately pay off existing bills at the other church, how will members feel if the merger does not work out? Will they feel used and hurt? Would they say, "the church only wanted our money?" Do you hold the monies from the sale of the property to make sure venture is going smoothly and if not, is it available to the old church to do something else?
- w. What plans do you have to get all the members united? Just saying let us have joint services or a party doesn't always work. Objective people can easily see that some will remain in cliques, which is normal for the most part but without vision or leadership of unity, people will remain speaking to members in their old church. Is there an effort to tell or guide people to mingle and if so, are they really willing to do so? So many times people are told but revert back to old comfortable ways. Be creative in ways of trying to get people to mingle. Plan a church dinner with nametags at tables, rotating the church membership. Have rows set up with alternating rows of church membership in efforts to get people involved. Have people stand and tell who they are, what they do, and what they like. A lack of planning creates a lack of unity.
- x. What plan do you have to instill the ideas of a dual pastor position with the church members? Will one pastor tell the other pastor in front of the congregation that "I need him" and "He needs me" or "We, the church, need this change" (other than financial). Financial need must not be the driving force for a merger. It can be an advantage but the foundation of the church has never been founded upon finances or money. It is about reaching the lost and how do we go about it.
- y. Have the pastors sat down to share their visions or goals? Have the goals in one ministry faded? Will they be accomplished by this merge? By working together, can your goals be fulfilled much more effectively?
- z. What if there is division on the church board? What can the pastors do? What if there is impasse on the board? What if both boards cannot work together? How can one instill unity and honestly say "everything is fine".
- aa. What about Christian workers. When there is talk of a merge, people talk about quitting a position, relieved that they finally have someone who will assume their responsibilities. Some will say, "Someone else can do it or do it better". Often times, the church is left with about the same number of people doing the work as before, only the faces have changed.
- bb. Department heads. Are they looking forward to a merge? What are their goals and visions? Will this make their department stronger and be able to reach more lost souls?

3. Once pastors have met, plot a “course of action”.

One may consider bringing in a “coach” to help both pastors to objectively look and consider. If both pastors have done their homework and planned properly and there are definitely more pluses than negatives, what is next? Name change, advertising, open house, sale of property? What type of excitement can both generate? What jointly goals do both have for the next 6 months? 1 year? 3 Years?

4. Regularly scheduled meetings with both pastors.

Review and look back on objectives and goals on a regular basis! Measure your progress. Be objective and honest about the positives and negatives to the merge. If something is not working, brainstorm together for a change. Get the spouses involved in the planning also. If needed, get the board’s opinion.

5. Have regularly scheduled prayer with one another.

Prayer changes things (and people too). The Bible states where one is able to send 1,000 to flight, two can send 10,000! There is power in prayer and there is power in numbers. Every pastor needs to have a prayer partner but so often most feel all alone or isolated. No church wants the devil to have any stronghold in the church or decision process. Ineffective leadership, planning, and prayer can cause a well meaning merge to cause the church to fail and close. The original goal of a merge is to effectively reach the lost through increased numbers. It is never a goal to close down a church.

I hope these ideas are helpful to you and your church. This outline is not intended to have all the answers. With the growing financial pressures of churches nationwide, there is a temptation or a suggestive thought of pursuing a merge. Merges can be effective but I cannot over emphasize the importance of planning!!! Too many people are impulsive and superficially say, “Oh, this merger is of God, we can easily work together” but you must consider the differences. Without proper planning and objectively looking at all the possible snags, a merger can be detrimental to the testimony in the community. People expect the church and its members to get along. When churches fail, so goes their testimony!

God is the author and finisher of our faith but he allows us to seek wisdom. Remember the old saying, **“People without a plan, will plan to fail!”** If you need other advice or help with church issues, please feel free to call Pastoral Care, Inc.