



Potentials

I N P R I N T

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INSIDE

Amalgamations and mergers are being increasingly recognized as a legitimate course of action in a time when churches are experiencing decline but want to meet the challenge by building a ministry of growth that will require a healthy resource base. This means ...

- understanding the processes of mergers and amalgamations
- having the courage to work with a congregation's sea of emotional processes to effect profound and irreversible change.

Amalgamations & Mergers – Last Gasp or New Ministry?

By Janet Marshall Eibner

Amalgamation and merger have got to be two of the hottest words in the congregational development vocabulary these days. Hot in the emotional response they inspire – hot for the lack of clarity and guidance available. *Potentials* has had the opportunity to work with congregations at various stages of amalgamation or merger. Our hunt for expertise, theory and methodology has turned up many stories, some experienced and wise people, and surprisingly little writing on the topic.¹ What has become abundantly clear is that even at the best of times amalgamations and mergers are messy! They take a tremendous amount of energy, time, skill, leadership and faith.

The first mess we encounter is our language. It is not helpful to use merger and amalgamation interchangeably to describe the coming together of two or more congregations. The two processes are quite different expectations, goals, tasks, risks and benefits. To mix and match name and intent muddles expectations and complicates communications unnecessarily. *Potentials* understands merger and amalgamation as follows.

Mergers:

A + B = a somewhat bigger A

Mergers happen when one or more congregations join another. In most cases there is considerable size difference between the congregations but this is not always true. The following are indications of a merger.

- One congregation retains its name or the founding congregations join their names.
- One congregation retains its building without significant redesign.
- Only the congregation losing its building has rituals of closure.
- Clergy and paid staff stay.
- One congregation's identity dominates. There is a persevering 'host – guest' dynamic in the new congregation.
- Resources and leadership roles are shared but the structure itself isn't changed (i.e. memberships on existing committees and boards are adapted to include equal representation from each congregation; existing staff are accommodated with relatively unchanged job descriptions; while funds may increase, budget allocations remain the same...).

Many amalgamations have been stalled by a smaller congregation's resentment over being treated like a poor cousin ...

**Amalgamations:
A New Church is Born**

Amalgamations are more rare. Here two or more congregations close so that together they can create a new congregation. The following are indications of an amalgamation.

- The congregation has a new name.
- A new church is built or an existing church is substantially redesigned.
- All founding churches have rituals of closure before the new church opens.
- All staff (clergy and lay) leave within 18 months of the amalgamation.
- New vision and mission focusses the ministry – both what happens (program) and how it happens (process).
- A new congregational identity is intentionally built and supported through the development of shared symbols, rituals, stories and traditions.

Motivation:

Expectations and Experience

Difficulties and messiness also arise from paradoxical expectations and motivations. Congregations choose to merge or amalgamate for many reasons. Some have reached a stage of crisis or recognize that they are on a path of irreversible decline. Others are motivated by a desire to create a congregation that has enough resources and program to respond to the needs of their community and context.

Congregations entering a merged or amalgamated relationship can be acting out of different motivations. Imagine one congregation looking to amalgamate because they can no longer sustain their ministry, while the partner congregation sees the opportunity as one of adding newcomers to a self-sufficient congregation. This is a typical example of the power imbalance that can underlie and derail a merger or amalgamation relationship from the start. Many amalgamations have been stalled by a smaller congregation's resentment over being treated like a poor cousin or a larger congregation's empire-building behaviours and attitudes.

The power differences are real and have implications. It is in no one's best interest to pretend they don't matter. Leaders can work to ease the tensions and create more equitable negotiations through the development of motivation, and through the covenanting processes which will frame the relationship and negotiations.

The long-term health and effectiveness of the new congregation is jeopardized when a merger or amalgamation is built on the need or enthusiasm of one congregation and the apathy or passive benevolence of another. Leaders must evoke and build a vision and vigour for what is only possible together and a corresponding dissatisfaction with the status quo. In this way the desire for a new ministry will be shared even though the motivations of the congregations might be very different.

¹ I am indebted to my colleague Paul MacLean who has made significant contributions to the research, work and reflections on this topic. We in turn would like to thank: Dick Prince and the congregation of Faith United, United Church, Courtice Ontario and Susan MacAlpine-Gillis and the congregation of Cole Harbour United Church, Nova Scotia. Barry Goodwin of Harrowsmith Verona Pastoral Charge, Bay of Quinte Conference has generously shared his experience and expertise. We have used the writing of Ian Fraser (*Congregational Life Newsletter* Canadian Centre for Congregational Life, Feb. 1996), Stephen Maybee (*Exchange*, Winter 1992) and Carol Gregg (*Merging Successfully: A Study Guide on Congregational Mergers*, Alban 1996). Two books we have found particularly helpful are *Change, Grief & Renewal in the Church* by Gerald Arbuckle (Christian Classics 1991) and *Making Sense of Life's Transitions* by William Bridges (Addison Wesley 1980).

Covenanting between the congregations should occur at each significant decision-making moment in the process, such as when first entering serious dialogue and in preparation for a vote. In the covenant, each congregation states what they will put aside or give up in order to have energy for the project; they will also agree not to bind themselves into relationships with others (such as leases) which may impede the amalgamation or merger. Equitable partnerships will be facilitated when the congregations share the vulnerability of giving up some of their security (financial or programmatic) to engage fully in the amalgamation process.

Conflicting Desires

Regardless of motivation and enthusiasm for coming together, the process always surfaces a set of new hopes for church life which come into conflict with other commonly held desires. Most of these are related to congregational size. They will likely include:

- The desire for lots of people and resources *and* The desire for intimate community (belonging to a church that feels like a family, where everybody knows your name)
- Creating something fresh and new *and* Preserving all our congregational histories, traditions, symbols, rituals...
- Needing a more formal organizational structure to support a larger ministry *and* Wanting to function with the flexibility and informality of a smaller congregation.

No congregation can fulfil all of these desires. The paradoxes must be recognized, named and managed along the way. Choices need to be made and people will grieve what is lost.

One common motivation is simply unrealistic. Many congregations merge or amalgamate to grow numerically beyond the sum of their memberships. But research and experience shows that congregations will lose members. Not everyone will agree with the new vision. Not everyone will be able to make a change of this magnitude. People who have a weak attachment to the congregation may choose this time to leave.

It will take time for the new congregation to make the transition and redirect energy from the process of coming together towards evangelism and new member ministry for people beyond the founding congregations. Even in the most positive situations it may be a few years before the new congregation is ready and able to grow in numbers.

I suspect that merged congregations have a longer wait for numerical growth than do amalgamations. The tasks and struggles of learning to live together in a merger are often managed less intentionally and can therefore be fraught, leaving issues and feelings unexpressed and unresolved. If you are already managing a new and significant 'host – guest' dynamic between the merged congregations themselves, is there room for more guests?

These cautionary notes are not intended to discourage leaders. The new congregation is likely to be in much better shape for growth after the amalgamation or merger has settled than either congregation would have been on its own. Rather, what we need to do is develop realistic expectations and deal with the inevitable anxiety and reaction.

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A Preference For Amalgamation

Mergers are the more common experience because they offer the path of lesser resistance. However, one has to ask whether most mergers are new ministry developments or attempts to rationalize resources – hoping that two or more struggling congregations will make one larger and more self-sufficient church. Given the widespread need for churches to seek and build new mission and ministry, the vision-driven imperative of amalgamations should be the preferred model. Even when merger is the only possibility, we can still learn, adapt and use some of the tasks and processes of amalgamation.

Amalgamating takes time. When the congregations are highly motivated, it can happen within two or three years. Often it takes much longer. An experienced consultant in the field says they take an average of fifteen years from the first conversation to full establishment! Regardless of time, a three-phase conceptual framework of preparation, transition, and establishment has emerged from experience.

Preparation is the time between the first informal mention of amalgamation as an option through to the event that immediately precedes the birth of the new congregation. In highly intentional processes this preamalgamation phase can last for as little as 18 to 24 months. Sometimes it lasts for many years. But once congregations have made the formal decision to proceed towards amalgamation preparation activity becomes intense.

Pertinent information is collected on demographics, finances, legal issues, real estate options, contractual obligations, denominational polity and human resources issues. Options are explored, proposals developed and the vision for amalgamation is formed and adopted by

most members of the congregations involved. During this time each congregation needs to explore and articulate key aspects of its own identity.

- Who are we as a community?
- What are our most treasured stories, possessions, rituals and traditions?
- Who are our heroes?
- What can we contribute to a new ministry?
- What will we let go or change?
- What must we keep?
- What will we receive from the identity of the other congregation(s) in the amalgamation?

At the same time relationships are formed between members of the congregations through meetings, social gatherings, joint task groups, joint worship, designing the new space, choosing a new name. This is a good time to do skills inventories with members. There are lots of jobs to be done and new leadership required. It will be easy to make meaningful connections between the work of building the new church and peoples' skills and gifts.

People who have gone through successful amalgamations advise...

- Constitute task groups with membership from each congregation to micro-manage the amalgamation: to research, report, recommend and amend plans for all aspects of the transition and the new church's life (i.e. worship, property, education, relationships with tenants...).
- Determine clear timelines and stick to them during the active preparation phase.
- Use pre-existing committees, meetings and sermons for dreaming and visioning.

Avoid having these larger or established groups of people focus on details.

- Include a judicatory representative and someone who has experience in amalgamation from another congregation in the steering team. Outside consultants are also very helpful. They can provide good connections, objectivity and advice.
- Communicate. People get most frustrated and angry when they feel they are not being kept informed. Make sure the communication extends to people who may be absenting themselves from the process. They are likely to intervene to block change as the final decisions approach.
- The journey may be longer than you think. It may take a series of processes and decision-making events to get to an amalgamation.
- Pay close attention to ritual. Good closings and openings are crucial. They are not just for the worshipping community but for the committees and other groups which represent the heart and soul of the congregation and are also closing and reshaping (i.e. prayer circles, Sunday school, youth group, social justice committee...).

Transition begins with the joining of congregations and ends with the departure of all ministry personnel from the founding congregations. It usually lasts 12 to 18 months. The primary task is to work out the details of the new life together. This is best accomplished if the focus is on developing a sense of stability and permanence.

At the same time leadership must be highly intentional about developing a new organizational system and new methods of decision-making.

- Recontract with all staff and volunteers.
- Develop new routines, new committee or working group structures and new communications tools.
- Agree that no member of the new congregation will be identified by their previous church membership.

Begin to develop a shared story by resourcing a few new projects and quick-win accomplishments. Choose ministries which would be new or feel very different to the founding congregations. Connect them to the dreams and visions of what could only be done together which emerged from the preparation work. Include people from all founding congregations.

People who have gone through successful amalgamations advise...

- With staff comes power. Retain the paid ministry staff from all founding congregations for the first year after amalgamation. If you can, also retain other paid staff such as the musicians, custodians, and administrative staff.
- Encourage new ways of getting things done. Pay attention to both formal and informal processes. Formal processes include meeting structures, decision-making systems, and leadership roles. Informal processes include coffee hour conversations, ad hoc work and social groups. All need to be new.
- Create organic structures which reflect the key values and activities of people. Encourage experimental or pilot projects. When allocating resources and authority, give priority to task oriented groups over governance oriented committees. Avoid locking into official roles and rules too quickly.

The role of leadership is to present appropriate decisions for the congregation to deal with in a timely but not overwhelming manner.

As this phase ends paid staff leave (clergy, secretaries, educators, custodians, musicians...). Their departures open the way for the congregation to work at putting their new vision and mission into action through hiring personnel.

Establishment begins with the selection of new clergy and lay ministry personnel and usually lasts two to three years. Chances are good that by now most of the leadership is exhausted. This is particularly important for new clergy and staff to recognize as they enter their new ministry with energy and enthusiasm and are met with a congregation who may need to have a sabbath time of recreation and spiritual renewal. However, it is important that the congregation still works on amending and developing their mission and initiating ministries which will live out this mission.

A progression of decisions

Change takes time. It is reasonable to expect that any focussed work on amalgamation and merger has been preceded by a much longer period when the individual congregations have been discussing options and making decisions for their future. David Lloyd George, a former British Prime Minister, advised "Don't be afraid to take a big step if one is indicated. You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps." However, not all congregations are ready to negotiate an amalgamation in one vote. It can seem like there is a great distance between "Let's explore the possibility of amalgamation!" and "Let's vote to amalgamate!" It is the role of leadership to measure the size of jumps their members are able to manage. Some congregations, who have already been struggling honestly with their viability for a while, may be ready to leap this

chasm from initiating the discussion directly across to the final vote fairly quickly. Many more congregations will not be able to make a straightforward connection. Asking them to make a momentous decision too soon will stall or stop the process.

The role of leadership is to present appropriate decisions for the congregation or their delegates (a board, council or executive committee) to deal with in a timely but not overwhelming manner. Things to consider include...

- To what extent has the congregation been thinking about participating in an amalgamation or merger? How long has the topic been discussed as an option? How widespread is the conversation? Is it part of the official or unofficial (coffee hour & phone calls) conversations in the church?
- How much resistance to change do you perceive from the congregation? What are the wise women and men of the congregation saying?
- How does the congregation make decisions? Are they quick and decisive or do they work best when taking time for consideration?
- What do you believe the congregation can cope with at this time? What could the majority of people agree to? Is there the will to actually do something new?

Potentials has found that often the first question to pose is: Are the congregations willing to explore opportunities for ministry and mission within their geographical area that could best be accomplished together? This takes the participants into a time of gathering, sharing and working with information about their social and demographic context and their congregations' identity and internal

Are the congregations willing to explore opportunities for ministry and mission within their geographical area that could best be accomplished together?

demographics (i.e. trends in attendance, ages of members, finances...). The results of this exploration, which are best communicated to the congregation through a report, will respond to two questions: Is there a shared problem? and Is there a shared opportunity? It will name, usually as a continuum, the different points of view which emerge regarding the future shape of mission and ministry in the area and the amount of energy that should be expended in further explorations.

It is best to be honest and direct. People need to see their opinions expressed in this report. One example of this type of continuum comes from our work with the United Churches in Don Mills, Ontario.

- I Stay as we are. Accept members from closing congregations into the existing larger congregations. Do not spend any energy working together. Spend energy on strengthening existing congregations or working to closure.
- II Stay as we are as much as possible, and concentrate on strengthening existing congregations. Spend some energy on cooperation and joint projects where these do not interfere with existing program.
- III We need to work at creating something new and we need to spend significant amounts of energy now in joint, experimental ministry projects. A task force will examine medium term issues relating to a unified presence such as ministry, personnel, stewardship of resources including buildings, and governance.
- IV Time is short. The issue of a unified presence is urgent and needs to be addressed. We are currently in a time of strength and momentum. We have the people, assets, resources, and

vision for the church of the future. Delaying will erode this strength. We should move towards making our vision of a unified presence a reality now.

In this example, the four options represent opinions the steering team found in their congregations. The team declared their enthusiasm for the possibilities that option III represented. They did so, knowing that for the most part this was the emerging consensus within their congregations. Thus direction and pace towards amalgamation became defined. The next question became one of garnering official support for option III. In this particular case, after one more year of work, these five congregations were able to pose their yes/no amalgamation vote which was carried decisively in four of the five congregations.

People who have gone through successful amalgamations advise...

- Expect that the wording of the questions will not become apparent until you are ready to make the decision.
- Avoid questions that demand yes or no answers until absolutely necessary.

Adding Process

Amalgamations are complex. Leaders have the challenge of dealing with an extensive list of logistical tasks and decisions, plus a veritable sea of emotional processes – their own as well as those of the congregations.

Mergers and amalgamations disrupt the established systems and churn up a sea of emotions which underlies congregational life. The processes of loss and reintegration bring people and communities into a highly ambiguous state of strong feelings, disrupted

... we evoke emotions which can be both profoundly creative and potentially devastating

authority and changed communication paths and relationships. People will become deeply unsettled. When this happens we evoke emotions which can be both profoundly creative and potentially devastating. It is this volatility that will either fuel or stop change. In either case there is tremendous energy. Leaders must have the courage to acknowledge and work with the deep feelings of exhilaration and loss. We ignore this task at our own, and the community's, peril.

The dynamic interaction between values and events

Congregations have values which are expressed in every aspect of their ministry, in what they do and how it gets done. Understanding the powerful and dynamic interaction between values and events means recognizing how formal and informal processes work within a congregation's system. Managing their interaction means surfacing and working with the expressions of emotion, meaning and desire for the community's future. These expressions need to be linked to the formal processes steering the amalgamation.

Formal processes constitute a congregation's organizational structure. These are the public, mandated roles and functions noted in our constitutions, annual reports, and weekly bulletins to which representatives are elected, appointed, and hired (i.e. board and committee members and chairs, staff). They are the approved and public ways we share tasks, authority, accountability and responsibility (i.e. congregational meetings and votes, boards, committees, task forces and working groups). Formal processes also include our public methods of communication (i.e. sermons, newsletters, bulletins).

Informal processes can be much more difficult to see at work. These are our common practices, the often intricate web of relationships and paths which people actually follow when sharing information, making decisions and getting things done (i.e. the phone networks, coffee hour and parking lot conversations). They are deeply entrenched, regular and historic, imbued with meaning and a sense of rightful order and authority. They involve the congregation's real decision-makers regardless of official title or role: the matriarchs, patriarchs, gate-keepers, historians, bankers, patrons, heroes and scoundrels of our communities. These processes exist to maintain and protect the congregation's equilibrium and they are strong. In any conflict between formal and informal processes the informal processes will always win.

As an amalgamation process disrupts a congregation's established system, it activates and incites the informal processes. Imagine two layers of activity occurring simultaneously. At the surface are the practical activities and decisions of amalgamation. Most of these are designed with the purpose of profoundly changing the structure and formal processes of each congregation. Meanwhile, underneath these activities are an abundance of values, expectations, relationships, and allegiances, which when disrupted result in potent emotional reactions. Regardless of enthusiasm for the amalgamation or merger, congregations will churn up all the emotions of profound change: excitement, courage, elation, anger, gratitude, despair, withdrawal, regret, grief, sadness ... and the list goes on. If left unacknowledged and unmanaged by the leadership, the congregation's informal process system will act to stabilize the community and

calm the turbulent sea of emotions. This does not necessarily mean the merger or amalgamation will be stopped.

Depending on the opinion of those in authority, stabilization could be accomplished either by stopping change or by moving it ahead quickly. The objective of these informal processes is to return the congregation to a place of comfort and low anxiety.

But transformational change takes time. While it can feel chaotic and at times traumatic for truly new ministry to arise, disruption is to be encouraged. This is a task of leadership, because for the amalgamated congregation both formal and informal processes need to be made new. Leaders need to get in touch with these emotions, bringing them into the open, and finding ways the community can appropriately acknowledge them, by taking the time it requires.

Linking meaning and value with the tasks of amalgamation

Bringing emotions to the surface can be done with activities, usually formal processes, which are developed to help the community express potent meanings and values. Some of these activities will be unique to amalgamations and mergers while others will be the stuff of normal parish life. Each holds the potential to displace the informal processes of the congregation. These activities include:

- Joint social, programmatic and worship events
- Covenanting or contracting between the pairing congregations
- Biblical and theological reflections done in groups or with individuals, in sermons and in newsletter articles
- Music, especially congregational singing

- Building a vision and mission
- Choosing a new name
- The design and decoration of the new space
- Rituals of closure and opening

These activities are by their nature expressive. They are also opportunities for creativity and innovation.

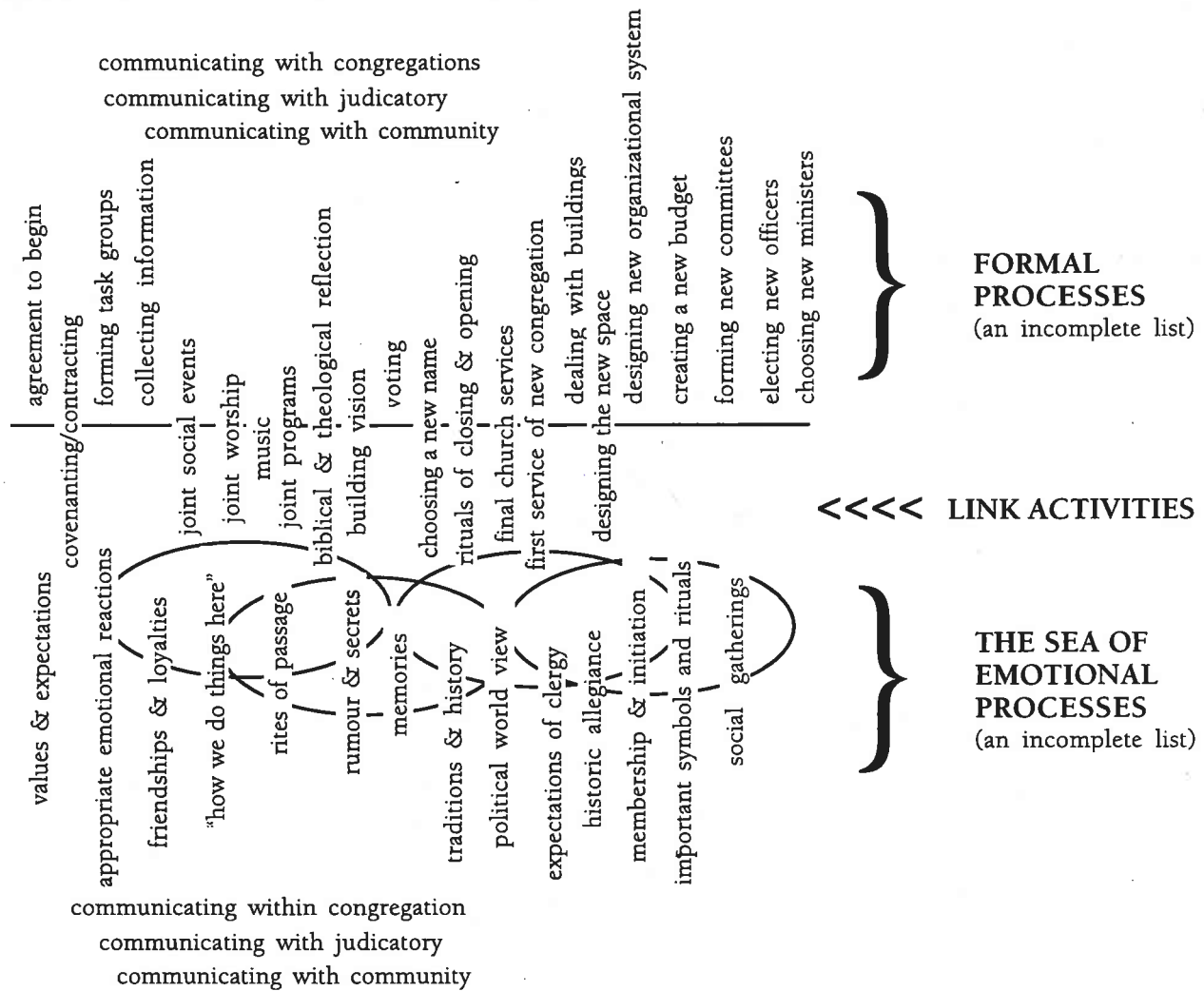
Designing link activities requires leaders to adopt an almost anthropological approach to their congregation, seeing the congregation as a stranger might to identify What does this community care most about? and What are their symbols and rituals and what do they mean? Outside facilitators or consultants can really enhance the design of link activities. Without any emotional associations, they will see the congregation's value system and the connections which can be made through link activities much more clearly than the internal leaders.

Here is a discussion of a few link activities that have worked well for congregations in amalgamations and other processes of profound change.

Joint events are the principal linking activities. They can be social, liturgical or task related. They are wonderful opportunities to include community building, story telling, and music. Going a little deeper, congregations could hold joint small group sessions for a variety of reasons relating to the amalgamation such as biblical and theological reflection, learning, personal support and prayer. The larger tasks of developing a vision and mission, choosing a name, and generating ideas for the design of the new church can also be accomplished in special joint visioning day events.

Another reason for joint events are to provide opportunities for people to experience what might only be possible

Connecting with the Sea of Emotional Processes:



through an amalgamation. Large, creative worship services with both choirs and lots of children are very powerful expressions of the vital and energetic church most people hope an amalgamation will make possible. Other popular choices are to initiate a joint outreach project, hold common choir practices, put on a concert together, and hold seasonal educational events such as Advent or Lenten study.

Through these, people get to know each other and build relationships based

on common purpose and mutual endeavour. In their role as link activities, joint events disrupt the webs of informal processes in every way: what is done, how it's done and who does them. Planning and implementing joint activities will involve the sharing of values, stories, and meaningful symbols and rituals since none of these can be assumed. They can also provide experiences of how it might be after an amalgamation, a peek at the promised land. This is very important as people

can rarely take a risk on things they have never experienced.

Covenanting or contracting was discussed earlier as an effective means of negotiating an equitable relationship between congregations with different resource bases or motivations for amalgamation. At best there will be punctuating events, usually at times of decision-making, when recovenanting occurs. Representatives from each congregation, usually members of the amalgamation steering team, describe their congregation's investment in the amalgamation project: the attitude of members, the church's financial situation, any impediments to the process. The next stage in the amalgamation process is then determined: the questions to be asked, the information to be gathered, the decisions to be made. Each congregation promises resources for the process as well as declaring what it will give up in order to make room and clear the way for the implications of this next phase. Through covenanting or contracting we become vulnerable to each other by opening our desires and dreams, freely sharing information, both giving and giving up valuable resources, and learning to receive from the partner congregation.

Symbols and rituals are powerful tools for a ministry of change. Given their highly associative nature symbols and rituals will hold strong meaning and value for the congregation. They help tell us who we are, and with some attention they can help tell us who we are to become.

For outside consultants it is usually quite easy to recognize the most important symbols and rituals in a congregation. While the worship and liturgy will have ritual and symbolic elements, the most powerful rituals and

symbols might found in other parts of our ministry. Hospitality at coffee hour, the use and care of the kitchen or library, the procedures for greeting newcomers or counting the collection may be as powerful symbols and rituals as the way we do baptism. For congregations these feel very familiar, the normal pattern of congregational life, so they can be difficult to see. Leaders can begin by asking, What is our congregation known for? Who are our heroes and scoundrels? When a newcomer or guest is being introduced to the church what are they told and shown? What would create the most anxiety in the community if it was suddenly taken away or stopped?

The following story will illustrate how congregational leaders might work with symbol.

A congregation, renowned for its music program was considering ways to revitalize its ministry after having experienced ten years of steady decline in membership, money and participation. For forty years this church had been well known for its excellent choirs and first rate performances. Most of the congregation attended because of an attachment with the music. The man behind the program was Dr. Vaughn Sanford, organist and choir director for 34 years. He ruled the choir, and the church with humour and an iron strong will. The congregation loved him and mourned his death six years ago deeply. Stories are still told of famous Dr. VS witticisms and tantrums. There is a Vaughn Sanford memorial window above the organ loft and a scholarship in his name.

The congregational leaders realized that the choir and especially Dr. Vaughn Sanford were powerful symbols for this congregation, ones that could easily be used to block an amalgamation. So, during a congregational event, the facilitator designed a timeline process

Symbols and rituals help tell us who we are, and with some attention they can tell us who we are to become

How can the values and meanings be secured within the new church?

where the participants were asked to tell the stories of the choir and its director from the past 40 years.

What the group learned was that many people had made their first attachments with the church and even with the faith through participation in the choir as a child and teenager. Through Dr. Vaughn Sanford's training they had learned how to sing well, to understand what they were singing about, to behave like a team, and to be responsible for always doing their best. The choir worked hard, expectations were high, but the rewards were great. They gave concerts with the local orchestra and every three years they went on tour. For many, the choir was the hub of their social life. Some had even met their spouses in the choir. Another interesting fact that emerged during this story telling was that during Dr. VS's reign, five choir members had gone on to become ordained ministers.

Towards the end of the story-telling session, one participant noted that while past experiences were wonderful, the choirs hadn't been attracting teens for a while, in fact the teen choir folded nine years ago and the junior choir was struggling along with only seven*regular members. The facilitator then asked the participants "Where could we build, in our congregation today, the opportunities for young people to find all the gifts Dr. Vaughn Sanford gave the previous generation: the training, responsibility, sense of accomplishment, rewards, and team building?" This question opened an energetic discussion where a variety of options were brainstormed, debated then prioritized.

The congregation accepted that the current music program was no longer a vibrant youth ministry, except in the nostalgia of their memories. While they were willing to try and redevelop a youth music program which could involve other instruments and different

types of music, the classical choral tradition was not going to be displaced easily.

In fact, new energy for youth ministry emerged later around a totally different project. A group developed a program for young people to raise money in the congregation so that they could spend a month during the summer in Haiti helping build a church.

In this story the leaders helped the congregation identify key symbols (Dr. Vaughn Sanford and the activities of the choir). Next they opened up the symbols by evoking the web of meanings and associations (the sense of accomplishment, opportunity to tour, a rich social life, a venue for expressing faith...). They then asked the critical question which challenged the congregation to think of its core values in terms of the future. This is imaginative and creative work.

- What do the key symbols and rituals mean for people? What are the stories connected to the symbols and what do they tell us?
- How can the values and meanings the symbols and rituals represent be secured and encouraged to grow within the new church? How can they be expressed and encouraged even if we can't take the ritual or symbol with us?
- Are the symbols and rituals potent for people in the new church, or is it time for them to change (i.e. in the example above, the "youth" choir that no longer attracted youth)? Are the associations we ascribe to our symbols and rituals outward looking? Will they lead us into the desired future for the new congregation?
- What is the prophetic edge? Where is God leading us next? (Opening the values and meaning of a previous

generation's music symbols led them to respond in fresh new directions through an outreach project which built relationships with Christians in the third world.

The effects of working with symbols and rituals should not be underestimated. Once they are opened and understood, symbols and rituals can be used as bridges between the old and new congregations by embodying both traditional meanings and a sense of new hope and purpose for the future.

As amalgamation nears, try to mark the closings and openings of all aspects of the congregation's life and work, its worship, social and educational groups and programs with appropriate symbol and ritual. This will help people encounter order and significance within the process of change.

Music is the soul of a congregation. It is an inexhaustible source of meaning for us and as such, has a very special public role during times of upheaval and change. Music is a very powerful medium because it has both personal and collective dimensions. It can carry potent individual memories and feelings often associated with transitional or formative events (weddings, funerals, the song that got you through the painful breakup). Music's collective dimension can be experienced in a congregation's repertoire of favourite hymns, the congregation's theme songs, which carry emotional meaning for the community. (Try celebrating Christmas without singing *O Come All Ye Faithful!*). In short, music can help us express that which is most difficult to express – both as individuals and as a congregation. Thus, music is highly symbolic. It is one of the most powerful symbols we have because through the act of singing or playing an instrument we make music –

we participate in making the symbol itself.

For most, singing the hymns or songs of our faith is one of the few times we actually say (or sing) anything about what we believe. Through congregational singing we are forming and asserting our beliefs and faith about the church, God and the world.

Because of its capacity to help us express that which is difficult to articulate, we can use music to give voice to what the congregation is feeling. It can also be used to help people feel some stability and security even during times of profound change. One of my favourite hymns is *All My Hope on God is Founded*. I have been told that Herbert Howells wrote this hymn for his young son Michael who was killed in World War I. I am inspired by his response to bereavement and grief which is so full of trust and hope. Singing this hymn inevitably helps me feel steady, confident and secure.

During amalgamations leaders can identify hymns from the congregations which have special meaning or significance. These can be sung often and at special, pivotal occasions during the amalgamation to help people feel some security and stability. There are also songs and hymns composed recently which use direct and contemporary language to proclaim hope for a vibrant mission and ministry.

Leaders can choose some of these which best express the new vision of the amalgamation. Together, the old and the new can become theme songs. They will help members express their feelings of grief and anticipation – saying goodbye to what is being lost and giving voice to the promise of new ministry.

Biblical and theological reflection offers a range of opportunity which is enormous, bounded only by our

Music is
the soul
of a
congregation

Linking emotions with scripture can help people find words to say what they are feeling

imaginations and traditions. Creative theological reflection helps people connect their experience with the stories and teachings of our faith, in ways that liberate energy and action. The first step is to listen carefully for the feelings people are expressing through their stories, concerns and actions. These emotions can be linked with a passage of scripture which is affectively potent enough for people to feel strong connections with what they are experiencing. Listen to Psalm 74.4–7.

Your adversaries roared in your holy place;
they set up their banners as tokens of victory.

They were like men coming up with axes to a grove of trees;
they broke down all your carved work with hatchets and hammers.

They set fire to your holy place;
they defiled the dwelling—place of your name and razed it to the ground.

Does this passage express some of the feelings people might be having when faced with losing their building? Linking experiences and emotions with scripture can help people find words to say what they are feeling. It gives permission to do so, even when the feelings are not easy. Further, biblical reflection, whether it is with small groups or in sermons, is a public expression, out in the open and shared.

But it is not enough for our reflections to stay stuck in grief and loss. Biblical reflection should stretch us to discover the prophetic edge in our experience. Where is God leading us next? Where is new, spirit-filled life? As an example, read Psalms 104, 88, 74, 73, and 23. If you read them in this order, you will

find a progression. It begins in a state of stability – a feeling of “God’s in His Heaven, all’s right with the world.”

You have set the earth upon its foundations, so that it shall never be moved. (Ps 104.5)

We move into feelings of chaos, pain, abandonment and despair.

For I am full of trouble;
my life is at the brink of the grave.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I have become like one who has no strength. (Ps 88.3–4)

This is followed by an unresolved condition of nostalgia, deep anxiety and a cry for deliverance.

Remember your congregation that you purchased so long ago,
the tribe you redeemed to be your inheritance, and Mount Zion where you dwell.

Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts;
never forget the lives of your poor.

Look upon your covenant;
the dark places of the earth are haunts of violence.
(Ps 74.2, 18–20)

The next Psalm begins to look into the future with faith and hope.

I have been afflicted all day long,
and punished every morning.
Had I gone on speaking this way,
I should have betrayed the generations of your children.

When I tried to understand these things, it was too hard for me;

Until I entered the sanctuary of God and discerned the end of wickedness. (Ps 73.14–17)

And finally we experience the surprising newness and gift of God's peace.

You have spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over. (Ps 23.5).

These expressions of sorrow, grief, despair, and anger turn first to hope and promise, and then to rich and blessed new life "in the face of those who trouble me". This journey is true for individuals and for communities.

This kind of theological reflection can permeate the whole of the congregation during times of change. While it can be a model for individual pastoral counselling, it's also worthwhile for management and transition teams to incorporate biblical and theological reflection into their meetings. It helps the group feel grounded and builds meaningful relationships among members. Finally sermons and study groups are logical venues for public theological reflection. Once again, leaders will be drawing to the surface the vulnerability and vigour of peoples' emotions, hopes and energy for new life and sharing these with others. For more ideas I strongly recommend *Change, Grief, and Renewal in the Church: A spirituality for a new era* by Gerald Arbuckle (Christian Classics, 1991).

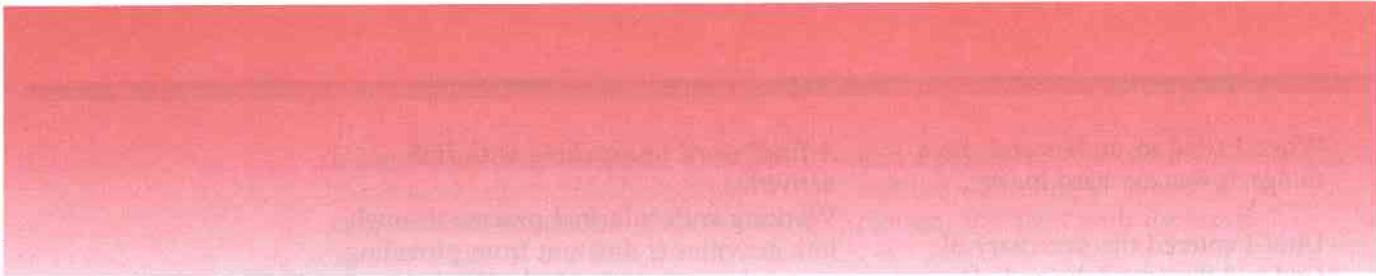
The link activities of joint events, working with symbol and ritual, and theological reflection can culminate in the choice of a name for the new congregation, which will itself be a new symbol, full of meaning and associations.

A final word on working with link activities

Working with informal process through link activities is different from providing pastoral care to individuals. While leaders in amalgamations must be in touch with the feelings and needs of people in the congregation and will be required to provide some pastoral care along the way, their primary focus will be on the communal emotional processes: helping the members make connections between the values, meanings and stories behind the emotions with the tasks steering the amalgamation. The aim is to encourage a time of public reflection on the mission and ministry which is only possible through amalgamation. At its best it is an active dialogue encompassing the past, the context for ministry today, and possibilities for the future: a time to name and situate the opportunity for change within the context, identity and evolution of the congregations, their neighbourhoods, the wider church and the larger, historic journey of faith told in the scriptures.

People who have gone through successful amalgamations advise...

- Keep in touch. Identify people with influence in the congregation and initiate lots of personal contact. Meet informally over a meal to check-in, hear stories, opinions and advice. Even if you don't agree it is vital that the lines of communication remain open.
- Listen for stories. When you are with people always listen for the stories they tell. What is motivating them or leading them forward? Where does it fit into the grieving or change process? Listen for the end of the story. What is the person's world view? Is it optimistic or pessimistic?



Is it expansive or contracting? Where does the personal story connect with the stories of the faith and tradition? How might these experiences be stretched and challenged to reveal the prophetic edge?

- Provide pastoral care ministers from outside the congregations for individuals who require special care or counselling. Leaders of the amalgamation process will often not be able to be effective pastoral care ministers for individuals, specially those who are most deeply troubled by the change. First, by leading the amalgamation leaders have become identified with the change and may not be seen as sympathetic to people with other opinions. Second, leaders will not have the necessary time or emotional energy to provide individual pastoral care.
- Leaders should clearly define their roles and their opinions. Rumours are one of the primary tools of informal processes and they need to be countered. Be prepared to tell the story again and again of how the congregation got to the point of considering amalgamation and of your own role and responsibility in the process. Be honest about your own feelings and opinions.
- No secrets. *Potentials* advocates for processes which engage as many people as possible and which result in the public display of thoughts, ideas, concerns and hopes. Use newsletters, bulletins, wall space, sermons and any other public forum you have to present and feedback information that has been collected from all aspects of the amalgamation process.

Last Gasp or New Ministry?

Amalgamations and mergers are being increasingly recognized as a legitimate course of action in a time when churches are experiencing decline but want to meet this challenge by building a mission and ministry for growth which will require a healthy resource base. For most congregations considering a process of merger or amalgamation means that they are feeling a sense of impending crisis. Crises open opportunities and opportunities invite choice. For congregations this choice should be to find creative and life-giving ways to do ministry and be faithful and responsible stewards of their resources of people and property. For congregations the sense of crisis can easily shut creativity down either by falling into a mire of panic, denial and inactivity or by jumping to a quick-fix solution. But congregations who are able to recognize the potential for creative change in crisis, are willing to take some risks, do the work, and who engage the emotional life of their communities, the intentional processes of amalgamation will offer a chance at new life filled with vision, purpose, spirited relationships, dynamic ministries, and liberated resources and energy.

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