

Top Ten Things You See in a Church Merger

By Tom Bandy, Easum Bandy Associates

I am getting more and more requests to consult with churches about mergers, but for different reasons than even a decade ago. In the past, church mergers were driven by necessity as financial crises or lack of personnel forced churches in similar geographies to consolidate their assets. A new type of merger is arising, however, driven by a multi-cultural milieu that is increasingly hostile to organized Christian mission. Relatively healthy churches are desperate for partners to credibly reach other cultures, or alliances that can provide resources to expand mission which are unobtainable from denominational or cross-sector sources.

In other words, “merger” does not have to be a by-word for failure or a strategy to avoid relocation. It can be a strategy for growing churches to become multi-site churches, and for denominations to invest their resources in mission expansion rather than institutional maintenance. Here are the top 10 keys to a successful, mission-driven merger:

1. God’s mission wins. There is no win/win negotiation and no trade-offs or exclusions. The participating congregations are not negotiating for their institutional glory or survival, but are creating a single, new community that will take the experience of Christ deeper and further.
2. Everyone is absolutely united by the same DNA. Shared core values measure behavior, bedrock beliefs are life-and-death, vision/mission captures the imagination of core leaders and church members. The unity of the new church does not depend on memories, past friendships, or old victories, but on the foundation of trust that empowers all future innovation.
3. Mission drives worship. Worship options are measured and strategically developed for transformation, education, inspiration, care giving, or mission-connection. Mission is not about the traditions, tastes, or comfort zones of pre-merger members, but the ability of the church to connect strangers to grace to God’s purposes.
4. Team leadership. Staff leaders are deployed to support a disciple-making process that grows Christians and equips leaders, rather than managing programs. Leadership is not by office or credential, but by teams of gifted, called, and equipped leaders. Leaders are deployed missionally, rather than geographically.
5. Measure property and program by productivity. Measure success by personal change and social impact. The longevity or honor of any sacred property or program must be second to relevance. All that matters is the Gospel, and everything else (no matter how “sacred”) is just tactics.

6. Form follows function. Interior and exterior space must be renovated to facilitate the physical and spiritual movement of people in the process of changing lives, growing Christians, calling disciples, equipping ministers, and sending servants.
7. Build around “signature ministries”. Don’t squeeze the signature ministries between other programs. Focus the major outreach ministries to both bless the public, and draw seekers into the experience of Christian discipleship.
8. Maximize technologies. Shuttle people safely, swiftly, and conveniently between campuses; use technology for long-distance learning and participation; communicate to every micro-culture in the preferred methodologies of that public even if that requires significant training for members.
9. Practice regular, rigorous evaluation. Measure mission attitude, high integrity, skills development, and teamwork for staff and volunteer leaders. Hire/acquire, train, evaluate, and fire/dismiss based on high scores in all categories.
10. Always vote for a vision ... never vote for a merger. The very term “merger” perpetuates looking back in time. Merger is just one step toward a larger, bolder, ten-year plan to grow God’s mission in the community.

If these ten principles are followed rigorously, it is possible for a merger to actually take church people deeper in Christ and further in mission. The sum of the whole can actually be greater than the sum of the parts.

Careful study of the ten keys to success reveals how stressful mergers can actually be. The remnants of Christendom thinking continue to undermine even the most faithfully conceived mergers. So here is my parallel “top ten” list identifying the pitfalls for church members that faithful leaders ought to consider carefully.

- 1) The merger was never really driven by a vision. Despite the rhetoric of staff and members, the real motivation for the merger is to solve an institutional problem that is somehow beyond the power of the individual church to resolve. The motivation is not really aimed to solve a mission challenge that is beyond the individual church to achieve.
- 2) The merger cannot eliminate “sacred cows” (properties, programs, technologies, or people). Leaders are not able to measure the real productivity of traditional ministries for the changing mission field. Income and energy continues to be sidetracked away from the agenda of God’s purpose to redeem the world.
- 3) The merger conversation fails to include the public. Leaders and members are prayerful; boards meet; members converse; but the churches do not really involve the diverse micro-cultures in the mission field in the shaping of the new vision that God is revealing to the church. The merged church is still too homogeneous, and fails to mirror the demographic diversity of the community.

- 4) The “signature ministries” fail to respect one another. Most churches will bring to a merger some major outreach ministry in which they invest significant money and leadership energy. These “signature ministries” have enjoyed considerable authority in the church, and too often become competitive for space, budget, and prestige.
- 5) There are “hidden controllers” who are unable to surrender ego or self-interest to the larger purposes of God. “Controllers” are dysfunctional people who want to shape the church around personal lifestyle, and are unwilling to shape personal lifestyle around the mission. Their intimidating personalities or personal neediness sidetracks the church from its higher purpose.
- 6) Staff and core leaders fail to integrate as a team. They fail to hold one another accountable for mission attitude, high integrity, skills competency, and teamwork. It only takes one staff person to prioritize their program silo, personal power, or salary package over the needs of the whole church to sabotage the trust of members for leaders and leaders for each other.
- 7) The organizational model fails to transform into a truly streamline, team-based, visionary structure. Instead, bureaucracies in each church that are already to large are integrated by artificial representation to form an even larger and more unwieldy board and committee structure. Decision-making slows down and innovation becomes secondary to program protection.
- 8) The newly merged church starts too timidly. Leaders and members are too “soft-hearted” and “merciful” around one another. They fail to assertively embed a new DNA, and worry too much about maintaining harmony. The inevitable loss of some members unduly terrifies them.
- 9) The newly merged church is drawn down to the lowest common denominator of excellence, rather than rises up to the highest standard of expectation. Each church brings strengths and weaknesses to the merger, but the newly merged church waits too long for weak leaders to step up and excellent leaders become too frustrated.
- 10) A middle judicatory (parent denomination) meddles in the newly merged church, imposing policies and procedures that sidetrack the newly formed community of faith from mission to polity. Usually this involves the restrictions about staffing, volunteer leadership deployment, or credentialing.

The bottom line is that successful mergers never ask the participating congregations to vote on a merger. They ask the participating congregations to commit to a larger vision. The merger is only one step in a multi-year plan to expand God’s mission through the creation of a new organizational entity.

Two examples of this new conversation about merger will illustrate the opportunities and perils.

The first example involves two Baptist churches in Washington DC. The first involves a growing congregation that has experienced a decade of steady growth under a strong leader, with the talents of a great staff, and a signature ministry to build significant “glocal” partnerships with non-English speaking congregations. A decade of economic transformation has landlocked their building, but they have insufficient capital to purchase extraordinarily expensive property nearby, and the county is hostile to selling property to any church that might grow over 700 Sunday morning participants. Providentially, a second Baptist church just a few miles away has a similar mission, with huge signature ministries for child development, primary, and secondary education. Yet they have plateaued in growth due to the loss of most of their staff through a past controversy that has now healed. The two congregations seem to “fit” together well ... but can they successfully navigate the merger of distinct congregations?

The second example involves two United Methodist churches in Florida. One is large and growing. They have visionary leaders, committed adult spiritual growth, and strong education, evangelism and social service ministries. Unfortunately, parking is critical and space is desperate, but the municipal regulations and economic development of the area makes it hard to even think renting a second site. The other church has a great location, large property, and several buildings, but has languished for years. The Bishop has wisely given the larger church an opportunity to absorb the smaller church into its identity and purpose ... but can they successfully reshape, reorganize, and redeploy resources so that the small church can be a catapult toward larger mission and not an anchor dragging them toward smaller mission?

The conversation to redevelop established churches for truly relevant mission in an increasingly hostile world is heating up. We are starting to move beyond preservation-driven mergers to mission-driven mergers. One thing is becoming clear. Coaching from an outside consultant who can help develop a detailed “master plan” for property, program, and staff development will be crucial to navigate the obstacles and opportunities.

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