

Middle Governing Bodies Commission

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From the The MGB Commission Observation Deck #8

I don't know who said it first, (Stephen Covey? Paul Batalden? Ed Demming?) but it gets quoted all the time. I said it myself yesterday in one of my coaching calls with a pastor. Here it is: **“Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.”**

And as our MGB Commission has flown around the country, sat in on conference calls, talked to dozens of EPs and Synod Execs and Elders and Pastors and committee members and GA staff members we have seen the truth of this pithy saying. And here is our next observation from our travels around the PCUSA:

Our system is perfectly designed to safeguard the status quo.

We want change. We know we need change. We are almost desperate for change. And frankly we know the world is changing faster than we are. Our Commission was formed to look at that reality squarely and “develop models” for discipleship for changing cultural context. Everywhere we go, we have been charged, exhorted, prodded and pleaded with to be “be bold”, to “bring change” to “think outside the box”, to “dream, envision, imagine” etc.

Yet, the system *as we have it* is perfectly designed to keep things, well... *the same*. Even the charge that our Commission was given boils down to this....

- **IF** you can get every affected Presbytery to agree to a change... and
- **IF** you can get every affected Synod to agree to a change... and
- **IF** it is consistent with the constitution as it is currently written...
- **THEN**...You can come to the Commission and ask for approval to do and ‘experiment’ or re-configure or re-align in a bold, creative, out-of-the-box kind of way.

Which is at least one reason why one year after we were formed, we have had exactly ZERO proposals come to our Commission for approval. (And frankly, most innovators are being thwarted by the constitution *not* presbyteries or synods.)

Because we all believe in the total depravity of humanity, and we all have experienced the pain of someone who ran with the scissors in the church parking lot or dominated the conversation or wouldn't keep the rules, our system is designed to be a ***safeguard against dysfunction***. It's like the structure of our national government (something endless pointed out in seminary classes on polity), that is designed for protecting against the tyranny of the majority and keeping checks and balances in places. It's a conservative system meant to preserve what has been, not innovative into what can be. Our government and our church structure is designed to use regulations to protect each other from the folly or arrogance or blundering bull-headedness of any of our members. In that way, ***our structure is designed so that the default answer is “no.”***

That is not to say that lots of old guard stakeholders have dug in their heels. Frankly, that's not what we are hearing. While there are certainly some, MOST leaders that I talk are simply stuck in a system that has over time stunted our imaginative capacity to actually think and dream of different, new ways of doing things. (As an architect once said, "First you build your buildings, and then your buildings build you.")

And this is not to say that there is no creative, experimental, out-of-the-box thinking going on out there. There is. But they really don't require a Commission at all. Those presbyteries and synods that are being led by creative leaders within environments of relatively high degrees of health and trust, filled with “mature and motivated” people are already making changes. We are trying to learn from them, applaud them and will pass along as we go the key lessons that can be applied to

all.

But *even in these places*, we have found the ‘default’ in the system is *not* about serving these healthy leaders so they can continue to be creative, innovative and bold, as they lead their communities toward health, fidelity and fruitfulness, it’s about keeping these innovative change leaders *in check*. (Which says something about "trust" which will be the next observation.)

(By the way, have you ever noticed that we only have two “official” titles beyond the congregational level? We have “Moderators” and “Clerks”. Our structure is designed with one person to insure that *everybody takes turn talking* and another person *checks the rules and takes the notes*. Our structure is not designed for *mission*, but for *conversation*. It’s not designed for *innovation* but *deliberation*.)

But... (And here if there was a soundtrack playing in the background, the strings would start in and your heart would soar just a bit)... *but...* one of the other truths is that even just “observing something changes it.” By our raising this observation, we on the Commission hope to also raise some questions about the kinds of structures that we need for *actually being part of God’s mission to change the world*.

Are we ready to take risks enough to change the design of the system (especially the *constitution*) to SERVE the healthiest communities, to SERVE the healthiest leaders, to SERVE the mission of the church, and to design *for* the uncertainties of the future rather than the problems of the past?

And, what would it take for us to be ready?

If we don’t...well, we are perfectly designed...for staying right where we are.

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This is a great piece. It reminds me of another saying (which I don't know who coined it.) The basic saying is that we have a choice "to do things right or to do the right things."

The idea is that we can focus on doing things procedurally correct (which isn't bad) or we can focus on doing the right things for the kingdom. I preached at Presbytery recently and made the comment that the only time the Presbytery affirms or reprimands us is when it comes to review of records. A church could lose half of their members, but if they documented it correctly they get a congratulations letter from the Presbytery. If the church doubles in membership but fails to record the approval of the Christian Education material that is used (part of the book of order requirement) then they get reprimanded.

The focus on doing things right hit me as I attended the exponential conference last week. It was brought to my attention that in the last decade 1200 new mega-churches (those that worship over 2000) were planted. How many of those were PC(USA)? ZERO. Not that I am saying that bigger is better but I find it disturbing that perhaps something in our system hinders a more rapid growth.

I also discovered with my research with Natural Church Development and the 8 quality characteristics of church health that the one

characteristic that is lower in larger PCUSA churches than smaller PCUSA churches is functional structures.

All of this leads me to conclude that perhaps our very system (formal and hidden) unintentionally hinders the growth of churches.

I do hope and pray for the MGB as you seek to have our system serve entrepreneurial churches and leaders as they serve the mission of God.

Posted by: Dana Allin | [05/07/2011 at 08:51 AM](#)



Thanks Dana, for the comments.

Posted by: [Tod Bolsinger](#) | [05/07/2011 at 10:21 AM](#)

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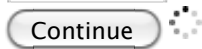
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