

## [TJ Addington - Leading From the Sandbox](#)

*A blog for those in ministry organizations who desire to take their leadership, teams, governance and ministry effectiveness to the next level.*

**Monday, October 11, 2010**

### [When Congregationalism goes amuk](#)

There is a great deal of confusion around the concept of congregationalism. Many mistakenly believe that congregationalism means that all folks in a church have a voice in all matters and that the congregation gets to weigh in on all decisions. In addition, to keep everyone in the loop and to ensure that nobody has too much power many churches continue to operate with numerous elected boards and committees. At its core, like American politics the system is built on mistrust of leaders so it is designed to make decision making complicated.

Congregationalism as defined above says more about bringing our national polity practices into the church than anything the New Testament says about church leadership! In scripture there is only one group of senior leaders variously called elders or overseers who are responsible for the spiritual temperature of the church, ensuring that the congregation is taught, protected, developed - empowered and released in ministry and led well. When new needs came up they simply appointed ministry teams like the deacons. All of this was designed in an atmosphere of trust where leaders were actually loved and appreciated by the congregation. And they were to lead well as under shepherds.

But what to make of the congregational thing? Congregationalism originally conceived did not mean a democracy or that every individual has an equal part in decision making. **The priesthood of all believers is not the leadership of all believers.** If that were true Paul would not encourage those with the gift of leadership to lead well.

Congregationalism meant something very simple. There could be no authority outside the local church such as the state church that could tell them what to do. Second it meant that congregations had a way to change the direction of their church if their leaders took it in a direction inconsistent with Scripture. Thus we say in the EFCAs that if a congregation calls its senior pastor, votes on an annual budget, votes on any changes to the bylaws or constitution and must approve the sale and purchase of property it is congregational. Boards may choose to bring other issues to the congregation but this is what it means to be congregational.

Too often, the way we practice congregationalism hurts the church rather than helps it. Multiple boards and committees are like toll booths that hold ministry up. The number of people on those boards and committees keeps those very people tied up in meetings rather than using their gifts in ministry. Leaders become discouraged because it is so hard to get things done and there is a huge loss on Return on Mission if indeed there is a mission being actively pursued.

If your ministry suffers from some of these elements it may be the very thing that is keeping you from moving forward missionally. And you do not have to live this way. My books *High Impact Church Boards* and *Leading From the Sandbox* (NavPress) can help you think differently about how you lead and about the missional elements to that leadership. Don't let your system constrain your mission. Design your system to serve your mission.

## [TJ Addington - Leading From the Sandbox](#)

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**Tuesday, May 7, 2013**

### [Rethinking the meaning of congregationalism](#)

Many reading this blog are part of churches that are congregational. The essence of congregationalism is this: All members of the church are filled with the Holy Spirit and all make up the body of Christ, so within the local fellowship, the congregation is the final authority under Christ. This means that no ecclesiastical hierarchy can tell the church what it must do, and that a congregation has the ability, if necessary, to override decisions of its leaders. It is rooted in a theological understand of the independence of the local church and the priesthood of all believers.

It is important to understand what congregationalism does not mean, because this biblical concept can morph into some unbiblical forms.

First, congregationalism does not mean that all members of the congregation have an equal voice in all decisions.

If this were true, the job of leaders would simply be to poll a congregation on any issue and take the church in that direction. The New Testament, however, places a high premium on strong leadership from spiritually motivated individuals who are vested with responsibility and authority. In fact, the New Testament has a higher view of leadership than many congregations, which ought to give us pause.

The New Testament model is that we are to choose godly leaders who have the gifts, skills and character to lead the church on behalf of Jesus in directions that are consistent with God's mission for the church. While the congregation has a role in choosing or affirming those leaders, they are chosen to lead, trusted to lead and given the authority to lead. Those who insist that all members of a congregation have an equal voice may be reflecting a popular belief as to how government should run on the national or local level, but they are not reflecting the biblical model for local church government.

Second, congregationalism does not mean that all members have a voice in all matters that leaders must decide.

Those who have the hardest time with this concept are those who remember when the church was a family (under 150 people), when most decisions were naturally made by some kind of consensus. In smaller congregations, naturally, more issues are discussed by the congregation because the church is a family system no matter what its polity. As a church grows, it changes, and the larger the church, the fewer issues actually come to the congregation.

As a church grows and leaders take more responsibility for decision-making, you often hear the complaint, "We are not congregational any longer." While we need to understand and be sensitive to the genesis of that comment, it is not necessarily a true statement.

Leaders can bring many or few issues to the congregation for decision-making and still be congregational. Congregationalism looks different in different size churches. Leadership pain comes when churches don't realize this and continue to bring numerous issues to the congregation as it grows, creating the biggest tollbooth of all: the need to have sign-off at congregational meetings for all decisions. It simply no longer works.

Ultimately, if a congregation has a say in the choosing of its leaders, in the calling of the senior pastor, must approve changes to bylaws, approves the annual budget and approves the purchase or sale of property, it is congregational, since it has the ability to override its leaders (if necessary) by changing its leader(s) or withholding permission on budgets.