

The Illusion of Being in Charge

Questions:

What is the area of your ministry that gives you the most energy? Where are you procrastinating?

Do African American churches have a different perspective on disestablishment because they have never been "the establishment"?

What is the impact of disestablishment on your local church? How does it impact you financially, with leadership, and emotionally?

Does our MBTI give us an indication of how we deal with "analysis paralysis?"

God brought Jeremiah to the potter's house and asks him, "Can I not take a nation or kingdom and start over?" (Jer. 18:7). God indeed led Judah into captivity. They relinquished many of the things that shaped their national, religious, and cultural identity: Jerusalem, the priesthood, the kingdom, and the Temple.

Jeremiah's prophetic purpose was more than to preach judgement of the of Judah. He purpose was to turn the people back to God. In the midst of bad news, Jeremiah was declaring hope, good news.

Defining Disestablishment

Disestablishment is the moving of American protestant churches from a place of influence and authority to a place of diminished influence and even powerlessness. It is a slow process that has been going on for decades. For years, the church lived in denial. Different churches, different communities, different parts of the country experience it in different ways and times. Churches in Boulder are in a very different place of disestablishment than Lamar.



Disestablishment's Local Impact

"We believe that, in many ways, this new era can be described as a time of exile. For North American Protestants it is a time of loss, of relinquishment, of disestablishment. In short, we no longer live under the illusion that we are in charge." - Willimon

In local churches, the impact of disestablishment is often harder to see. We often attribute the problems to aging populations or aging buildings. We ask, "What did the pastor do wrong?" Or, perhaps we assume that the church is a "clergy killer." We wonder if things would be different if we had a better location, better praise team, better technology, or a Facebook page. Sometimes, we think if we could the church's name, or leave the denomination, this would be a magic bullet for solving our problems. Sometimes all of these are very real problems. Sometimes. More often, they are part of larger and systemic

problems. Thinking Systems

It is important to take time to assess our “here.” This is not wallowing in self-pity or finding someone or something to blame. I propose that the only way to understand disestablishment is to look at the challenges from a systems perspective rather than a linearly.

Linear thinking says that A caused B therefore, if we change A then B will change. In a common church narrative, if the church is in decline (B), then it must be the pastor’s (A) fault. Therefore, the church must change pastors to grow. Over the years, the church has sought out many ways of “fixing” their problems. In most cases, these sought to address a single problem, not the systemic and interrelated challenges that face our churches.

It is much harder and time consuming to think systemically. Simply put, a system is the interconnected elements that are organized to achieve a specific outcome. (Meadows, 2008, p. 11) Systems can be good or bad, or neither.

As we look at the Exile, we can look at this as “the people sinned, God punished them by sending them into exile.” In reality, there are many elements to the Exile. 1) The geopolitical relationships between Egypt and Babylon. 2) The history of worshipping idols in Palestine. 3) The theological choice to have a king like other nations. 4) The power divided kingdom and kings who “did evil in the sight of the Lord.” 5) The Josiah reforms that made the people believe that they were truly reformed. 6) The conflicted messages between Jeremiah and the false prophets.

When I teach on systems, my favorite illustration of a system is the heating/cooling system for a house. We immediately think of the furnace, the air conditioner, and the duct work. Then we have to dig deeper and think of the insulation, the windows, doors, and then even the exterior walls. Then we have to think of how the system interacts with other systems: people want the temperature at different levels to be comfortable. Sometimes physical issues (weight or age) impact temperature. You also have to consider external influences such as the weather. If I want to keep my house at a comfortable 66 degrees, each change in the system, causes other parts of the system to react.

The Disestablishment of the church in our culture is like the weather. It impacts us, but sometimes we either give it too much credit or no credit for the state of any given local church. We need to look at the role of the pastor, the role of lay leaders, financial realities, and spiritual issues. Each of these are elements of a church system.

Dangerous Reactions to Systemic Problems

Quick Fixes: In times of anxiety, like today, the natural tendency is to seek quick fixes. These quick fixes tend to focus around a “magical helper” who comes into fix the problems of the church. They are hoping for an instant, low cost solution to all the problems. (Steinke, 2006, p. 17)

Analysis paralysis: The opposite of the quick fixes is the analysis paralysis. In our desire to understand the impact of any decision, some leaders or churches can hesitant to act because we don’t know how each element will respond.

Meadows reminds us that systems are adaptive and dynamic. They can be self-healing and resilient. They often work for their own self-preservation. They want to maintain stasis and resist change. (Meadows, 2008, p. 12) Churches, like families, abhor disruption and seek to return to a sense of stasis. As a leader, you must help your systems change, grow, and mature.

Journaling Assignment:

Can you help your pastor think through the different elements of a system that are impacted by a change she wants to make?