

# THE PASTOR'S DILEMMA

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## CASE DESCRIPTION

*This illustrative case study can be used to show the difficulties of working with volunteers that serve on an organization's advisory board. The case focus is on root cause analysis and problem resolution. Survey design and issues in dealing with a strong-minded leader are also considered. Upon completion of case assignments, students will be able to identify the steps in root cause analysis. The case has a difficulty level of two to three and is designed to be taught in one class hour. Depending on the depth of detail the instructor intends to pursue, preparation time for the students will take from one to two hours.*

## CASE SYNOPSIS

*A pastor is faced with a dilemma. Although his church is located in a growing area, the church's attendance, membership, and giving are stagnant. The church's advisory panel, led by an overbearing president, believe the solution is to combine the two Sunday services into one service. They are, however, basing their decision on questionable assumptions, a lack of data not recognized by the panel, poor analysis of data that is available, and pressure from the panel's president. This case explores the dynamics of working with a panel comprised of volunteers, working with a headstrong leader, considerations for the effective process of data gathering and problem-solving, and suggestions for investigating and instituting change in an organization not typically subject to change.*

## BACKGROUND

The pastor slowly rose to his feet. He had been praying furiously waiting for a revelation on how to handle this difficult situation. Through all of his education and pastoral experience, he had never been involved in an issue such as this. A bachelors, masters and even doctoral study had prepared him for leading a congregation on a spiritual journey, but not dealing the with the church's advisory panel (or council). They were convinced a significant change was needed in the church services. Specifically, several members of this small church in the Midwest believed that services had become stagnant as had the church membership and giving. They believed that rather than holding 8:30 AM and 11:00 AM services, it would be best to combine the two services, meeting at the 11:00 AM to 12:00 noon period. By folding the early service into the 11:00 AM service, the advisory council reasoned, the larger congregation would naturally be more energetic. The additional energy would eventually lead to a higher level of attendance from members, a greater likelihood of gaining new members, and with that, revenues that could be used to fund programs for the needy in the local community. Their brief six-week experiment led them to believe they were moving in the right direction and had just voted to make the change permanent.

The pastor knew he wasn't bound by the panel's recommendations but needed to consider their views as they were supposedly representative of the wishes of the entire congregation. The members of the council had, after all, volunteered for three-year terms, and once they satisfied their commitment, could stay on as long as desired. There were no membership requirements and the council tended to attract church members that had an interest in viewing the “business” of operating a church. There was no orientation for new council members, nor had any team training occurred with the council, the council’s president, and the pastor. Some of the council members, were asked to serve while others approached the pastor and offered to assist with the council’s work. These approximate 20 volunteers and reluctant “draftees” acted as the guiding body for the direction of the church. Several of the advisory council members had business experience, both operating small businesses as well as in a corporate setting. A few had formal education with one holding a degree in accounting which she used in her accounting practice. The requirements for members to serve on the council were simple – attend the bi-weekly meetings, which typically lasted about one and a half hours and vote on issues when asked. The vast majority of the members did not consider themselves as being overly active in the church but found serving on the council as a way to contribute to the church in some way.

With the exception of a few, the council members did not consider themselves to be leaders in the church, only parishioners interested in helping the church. It was the accepted custom for those few that desired a leadership role in the council to maintain an open line of communication with the pastor and other senior members of the church and be willing to spend the additional time to understand the issues facing the church. As the president’s term expired, members would hold a meeting to determine if any members were willing to take on the president’s role. The position was typically reluctantly filled by a more senior member of the board. The remainder of the council members relied on the president to make recommendations that were accepted with little discussion even though most votes were not unanimous. Members would simply register their opposition to a proposal by a vote rather than discussion. If a vote was needed, a show of hands was taken, as that was determined to move the meeting along at a faster pace than an anonymous poll.

The middle-aged minister had taken over this church four years ago after the previous pastor had moved to a larger church on the other side of the state. Chris, the previous pastor and an ordained minister, had started the church when he saw a need for nondenominational services in the growing community. As a recent graduate of divinity school, Chris, while working full-time in a “big box” home improvement store, built the church from a handful of parishioners that met on Sundays in his small rented home to almost 150 meeting in a rented multi-use facility within only a few years. The facility was primarily used as a wedding venue, generally booked on Friday and Saturday evenings, so the owner gave Chris, and his fledging congregation, a discounted rate. As the church outgrew the wedding venue, Chris quit his fulltime job and focused entirely on building the church that he believed the community needed. With a growing congregation coupled with increasing contributions, Chris and his burgeoning church managed to finance the construction of a moderately sized building only several miles from their regular meeting location. Planning for the future, their new gymnasium-style building served multiple purposes – as a worship center, activity hall, and church staff offices.

Later, as the church continued to grow, the need for additional space developed to the point where a construction campaign yielded the funds needed to build an even larger facility. Again, with a vision of the future, the advisory committee, under Chris’s leadership, determined that the current facility would house a children’s daycare service that was badly needed in the

community. Although the new business would require additional employees and state licensing, it was determined by the church's accountant that the revenue generated by the daycare would more than cover the costs and provide an additional source of income for the church. The new building would serve as a sanctuary as well as an expanded activity center, large enough for basketball and volleyball courts. The advisory council deemed the facilities more than adequate for future growth.

Chris, a humble but vivacious person, never harbored desires to do anything but grow his hometown church. But, when the search committee of a much larger church on the other side of the state contacted him, Chris felt an obligation to his family to at least listen to their proposal. While Chris had managed to maintain a reasonable standard of living for his family, he wasn't prepared to live the somewhat spartan life of a small church pastor. Even with his wife working part-time as a receptionist, the increased financial burden of leaving his management position at a "big box" home improvement store weighed heavily on him. He was, after all, the father of two small children and wanted to give them every possible opportunity to have a "good" life. It was in his heart to grow the church, but he had to consider his family.

With the full support of his wife, Chris traveled across the state to meet with the search committee. Upon returning, and after a long discussion with his wife, friends, and the church council, Chris decided to leave the church he had founded in order to take on the reigns of the much larger (and financially lucrative) church on the other side of the state.

A search committee was formed to find Chris's replacement, and through a rigorous selection process, Martin was determined to be the top candidate for the position. Martin had previously been an associate pastor at another church with the dream of becoming a senior pastor - a dream that he finally realized four years ago. The congregation had been accepting of the new pastor, although there had been some distressed feelings when it was announced that Chris, the previous pastor, would be leaving.

Initially, church attendance showed a minor increase as did monetary giving and church membership. Shortly thereafter, however, attendance became stagnant leading to lower revenues, coupled with little growth in membership. The advisory panel had viewed the numbers and became concerned that the church would continue to falter and, with reduced revenue and attendance, would not be able to serve the burgeoning community in which they were located. That was probably the most difficult aspect that the church's advisory panel had to consider - they were located in an area that was experiencing explosive growth. All around them contractors were in the process of building new subdivisions. It was only natural their church should grow - they were in one of the fastest growing regions in the state. New families were moving into the area at an unprecedented pace, but the growth of the church was anything but memorable.

Something was wrong, and it was the responsibility of the panel to "fix" the problem. Although this was not a problem when Chris, the previous pastor, was leading the church, the issue, as the advisory board saw it, was that two services diluted the spirit of the church. In other words, two smaller services could not develop the enthusiasm and "family atmosphere" that a few members of the panel believed were necessary for the church to thrive.

Leading the drive was the advisory panel's President, Paul Forthright. After graduation from high school, Paul attended a community college where he received his associate's degree in business management. After graduation, Paul was employed as an administrative assistant with an oil and gas company. While working, Paul took advantage of his employer's educational assistance program and earned his bachelor's degree in business administration. His hard work

was rewarded with his eventual promotion to manager of mineral rights acquisition. Now 37 years old with a wife and two children, Paul and his family have been members of the church since moving to the area eight years ago.

Paul assumed the leadership position about a year ago after serving on the panel for three years. A thoughtful individual, Paul, nonetheless, was quick to make a decision and had little patience for anyone that questioned his authority. Colleagues at work described him as being “assertive” almost to the point of bullying others to achieve his objective. He has expressed his frustration with other members of the council for their slow, methodical decision-making process. “We take too long making decisions” he complained.

This was in sharp contrast to the previous President, Ronald Calmson, who meticulously reviewed each decision with the panel and, in order to not sway the members, chose to withhold his view until after everyone had expressed their opinion on matters brought before the council. Paul, a member of the council, was frequently at odds with Ronald over his leadership style. “Tell them what to do!” Paul would tell Ronald in private, and occasionally when the council was in session. The friction between the two was palpable. The members of the council were volunteers, Ronald thought. They don’t want any drama and won’t tolerate any political shenanigans.

Ronald was well aware of Paul’s reputation as someone with little tolerance for differences of opinions and extended discussion. If Paul thought a council discussion was going on too long, he would not hesitate to tell another member to “Wind it up. We’re burning daylight,” if he believed they were taking too long in explaining their position on a matter. He also saw no need for agendas. He considered them a waste of time and stated several times that “good” managers could run a meeting without having to resort to a “roadmap.” He vowed that when he moved into the president’s position, that he would “move things along” and “turn this church into something to be proud of.”

Regarding the declining attendance and revenues, he was convinced that combining the services would “save the day” and pressured members of the panel to move forward with this idea, of which he was the primary architect. Martin, however, was not convinced. “I don’t believe this will work,” Martin told the panel during their monthly meeting. “Think about Starbucks,” he said. “They’ve got stores all over the place. If they followed the same principle that Paul is proposing, they’d have only one store in town.” Besides, other members of the panel have expressed reservations about the change. How will the members that attend the early service respond? Will they adjust to the later service or will they transfer to another church? The members considered the pastor’s argument and then Paul insisted that a vote is taken before the conclusion of the meeting. The vote, by a slim margin, was for Paul’s proposal. So, a decision was made to conduct the experiment and combine the 8:30 AM and 11:00 AM services into one 11:00 AM service during Lent, the six-week period between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Martin didn’t agree. “If this works, I’ll stand before you and eat my hat.”

He knew he could override the group’s decision, it was, after all, an advisory panel, one that the pastor was not obligated to follow. Martin knew, however, that if he didn’t comply with their decision, Paul would blame him if the church continued to lose attendance and revenue. The panel’s members, Paul, and Martin left the meeting, and Paul would draft the email to all of the parishioners announcing the temporary change.

During the six-week period, the combined attendance reached a level greater than the total of the two services for the previous six weeks. Emboldened with that data, Paul believed they were on the correct path - the combined service was the sole reason for the increase in

attendance.

There was no discussion on the differences in the content of the services. The early service was a contemporary service with the church choir and all of the formal trappings of a typical religious service. The 11:00 AM service, on the other hand, was deemed a “contemporary” service with a Christian rock band, and very informal adherence to any religious doctrine. Paul didn’t want to hear of any dissent. “It’s a church service. One’s as good as the other,” he stated. Ronald and Martin were stunned. There were significant differences in the services with the early service aimed at the older, conservative churchgoer, while the later service was designed for young, sleep-in, music-minded young people. As president of the council, Paul was in charge and pushed the members to approve the motion to combine the services, over the objections of Ronald and Martin. With a show of hands, a slim margin prevailed and the committee approved the temporary change.

Some parishioners were perplexed at the change. While the area was experiencing tremendous growth, it was still, in many ways, a rural area with farms dotting the landscape. The farmers longed for the early service that would allow them to attend church then go to work avoiding the heat of the day. Others, such as nurses, preferred the first service which would give them the flexibility to attend church then work a full day's schedule and still return home at a reasonable hour. The more traditional parishioners preferred a service without a band with guitars and drums. The church had a fine choir, why tamper with a good thing by adding loud rock music to an already pleasant service?

During Lent, the panel decided that a survey was necessary to accurately assess the parishioners’ attitudes toward the combined services. The combined services experiment would continue one week after Lent to allow for return of the surveys that would be distributed immediately after Lent. The survey was sent to those members in which the church office had email addresses. Since no one had any experience in developing surveys, Paul undertook the task. It was a relatively short assessment, completed online, in which no identification was requested. Using a scale of 1, completely agree, to 5, completely disagree, the questions included: Have you enjoyed the new services? Do you like the music? Is the temperature of the sanctuary comfortable? Is the volume of the public address system for the pastor and choir sufficient? Is the lighting adequate for the services? Were you able to find a convenient parking place? Is seating in the sanctuary comfortable? Will you continue to attend our church? Finally, Paul concluded with a “Yes” or “No” question - Are you a member of this church?

The results of the survey were mixed but positive. Paul and the advisory panel believed that the modest increase in attendance and giving, coupled with the survey results gave clear and unequivocal signal that the changes they put in place would reinvigorate the church. Paul now firmly believed he had saved the church. As a result, the panel, under pressure from Paul and again with a show of hands, voted to eliminate the early service and hold only one service at 11:00 AM. To alleviate issues with the change, it was also decided that the 11:00 AM service would remain as a contemporary service, rather than attempt to work out a combination of traditional and contemporary practices. As the meeting ended, Paul went home to prepare the email stating that there would no longer be any 8:30 AM services. Ronald picked up a friend and headed to a local casino to try and forget the debacle that just occurred. Martin left the meeting room, went to the chapel and started to pray.

Review the case and consider yourself a consultant for the church. They want you to analyze the situation and develop an “after action” report in order to avoid any “issues” if this situation may occur in the future and to help other congregations that may be dealing with a

similar situation. Consider the following questions in your analyses.

1. What is the root problem?
2. What should Martin have done prior to the vote to combine the services?
3. What should Martin do now?
4. What are the potential causes of stagnant church attendance and giving when the surrounding area is growing?
5. Did Paul and the advisory panel adequately explore those potential causes?
6. Does Paul's vision for the church differ from the other council members' vision?
7. What leadership characteristics should the church advisory panel consider when electing a president?
8. Could Chris or Martin have taken action to avoid the situation?
9. Based on your coursework, what could have been done to either prevent the situation from occurring or minimize the effect of its actions once implemented?
10. Do we know for certain that the combination of services is the sole reason for the increase in attendance?
11. Were there any potential issues with the survey and the method to distribute the survey?
12. How could the survey be improved?