

Team Church: A Congregational Way of Being Christian

I Corinthians 12: 4-12

January 29, 2017

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I don't watch many TV shows. If I do watch something, it's usually a cycling race that Dennis records for me. However, I do like watching the European crime dramas on Netflix. I recently started watching Season Three of *The Fall*.

Episode One includes a scene in a hospital emergency room where a medical team is trying to keep alive a man who's been shot. It's a fascinating scene. The medical team consists of six or seven people, each with a specific job, each highly skilled. While the bloody body lays on the table, different members of the team pump this, inject that, insert something in, suck something out, monitor machines, yell out information. It all happens very fast. It's very intense. It's a race against time to save this man's life.

But here's what I found most interesting: overseeing the whole operation is one guy who stands back, observes all the action, makes all the decisions, and issues commands to everyone else.

Cut...puncture...inject...increase...decrease...do this...do that...and everybody on the team follows his commands immediately, without question. He calls himself the Czar. And he's smart. He knows exactly what to do, exactly when to do it. He responds immediately and correctly to every situation that arises with this patient who's teetering on the edge of death. And the people he's ordering about never question him, they follow his every command. They work fast and they get it right the first time. It's incredible teamwork.

So yes, there's some interesting stuff on TV. But like I said, I like cycling the best. Speaking of cycling, can anyone beat Team Sky in the Tour de France this year? For the past several years, Team Sky has dominated the Tour de France.

Team Sky is cycling's version of the ER team I just described. Chris Froome, their team leader, is arguably the world's best Grand Tour cyclist; he excels way above and beyond most other riders. But cycling is far more than an individual sport, it's a team sport, and Team Sky has assembled around Chris Froome a team of riders who're very strong and highly disciplined. Each rider has a particular skill or strength, and a very specific role on the team. All the individual members of Team Sky function together at a very high level as a team. Some people don't like Team Sky because they strategically operate like an unstoppable machine.

Team Sky has also mastered incorporating cutting edge science and technology into their training and race strategy. They do the most in-depth analysis of not only their own rider's physiques and power outputs, but that of their rivals as well. They're now working on incorporating a new theory—strategic dehydration—into their training regime and race strategy.

Finally, Team Sky has tons of money. They're bankrolled by one of England's television stations, so they can afford the strongest riders, the latest research, and the best equipment.

Can any other team beat them this year? We'll see.

The emergency room medical team and Team Sky—why do I mention both of these teams today, on the day of our Annual Congregational Meeting? Because both of these teams remind me so much of our church.

No, just kidding! Because they're nothing like our church.

Our church isn't an extremely disciplined high-functioning team of well-trained professional Christian disciples. I'm not the pastoral equivalent of Chris Froome. I confess, I'm not arguably the best pastor in the world. Nor are you the church equivalent of Team Sky.

Our church doesn't have a command and control hierarchy, with one very smart person observing everything, making all the decisions and giving all the orders, while everyone else, highly trained in their specific skills, follows every order without question, and does everything quickly and right.

Our church isn't particularly strategic in its ministry. To the extent we do develop strategies to accomplish things, it's often rather last minute, seat-of-the pants, and subject to change, depending on who shows up, how much time and energy they have, how far they have to drive and how long they'll be stuck in traffic.

Our church is certainly not obsessed with utilizing that latest science and technology. Other churches use far more sophisticated audio-visual technology than our own. It was a big deal for us to get a microphone on the pulpit that actually works and a couple hand-held mics.

Finally, our church doesn't have lots of money. Unlike Team Sky, we're not bankrolled by a wealthy company committed to providing us with everything we need to be the very best church with the very best pastor in the whole wide world.

As a church, we're just not like an emergency room medical team or Team Sky. But let me ask you, would you want to be part of a church like that? Probably not, or you wouldn't be here.

With that said, do I sometimes wish we were more organized? Yes.

Do I sometimes wish we could function more highly as a team? Yes.

Do I sometimes wish more people would step up to do more things? Yes.

Do I sometime wish we were more strategic and disciplined? Yes.

Do I sometimes wish we had more knowledge and skill sets available to us? Yes.

Do I sometimes wish we had more up-to-date technology and more money? Yes.

And let me ask you, do you sometimes wish you had a more skillful pastor? Yes, of course you do. I wish I were a more skillful pastor all the time.

It's fine to wish for these things. Wishes can be aspirational. They can motivate us to be more than we are, to do more than we do, and to be more effective in how we do it. But one thing's for sure, I could never be part of a highly disciplined command and control church, where one authoritative person calls all the shots, where everyone else knows their proper place and jumps when the Czar or the leader with the yellow jersey yells jump.

Some churches are actually kind of like that. Ours, thank God, isn't.

Our church is far looser, far messier organizationally. If you want another emergency room analogy, our church is more like that old TV show *M.A.S.H.* We've got our share of

unique and interesting individuals. Discipline is not a big thing for us; we want just enough discipline, but not too much. We often take a while to make decisions. Once we do, we generally get the job done, though it may be a bit disorganized, not finished on time, and not necessarily done by the book.

As a church, we don't organize ourselves as an ER medical team or a professional cycling team, not just because we don't feel like it, but because it would be inappropriate for us to organize ourselves like those teams. To do so would violate something essential about who we are, why we're here, and what we do.

Think about it. The organizational form of the ER medical team and Team Sky are perfectly consistent with their goals. Get seven or eight highly trained people with specific skill sets to closely coordinate their efforts as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to save someone's life or to win the most difficult sporting event in the world.

To achieve these goals, there's no time for debate and group discussion. There's no vote to decide what to do next and who's going to do it. There's no room for error in executing the plan. No excuse for slacking off by any team member. To achieve these goals, you want a strong, smart, authoritative leader. You want command and control hierarchy and authority. You want each team member's obedience.

That's how you save the life of someone bleeding to death with a bullet in their gut. That's how you win the Tour de France. But those are not our goals. So that's not how we organize ourselves.

What's our goal? How is the way we organize ourselves consistent with our goal?

There are, I think, as many ways of articulating our goal as there are members of this church. But that in itself is consistent with our goal, because our goal is, in part, to encourage every member of this church to discern our goal, to articulate it in their own words, and to do their part to fulfill it.

In other words, an essential aspect of our goal is to encourage as much input and participation as possible, from as many perspectives and voices as possible, in order to discern who we are, why we're here, and what we're going to do. The participatory process in our decision-making and our implementation is itself an essential element of our goal. If we achieve wide and active participation in making our decisions and implementing them, then we achieve an essential element of our goal.

Now obviously, there's more to our goal than widespread participation. We create this church because we share a basic consensus on who we are, why we're here, and what we're going to do. We share a set of basic implicit and explicit beliefs, values and visions. They're often articulated through our Sunday morning liturgies—our prayers and statements of faith, our hymns and anthems, my preaching, your joys and concerns. They're communicated through our ministry—our care for one another, our care for the homeless, our solidarity with Muslims, our support for LGBTQ rights and immigration justice, our insistence on a world free of misogyny and racism, things like that.

We share with one another a particular way of being Christian. Some like to call it a

progressive way of being Christian. But it's also a Congregational way of being Christian. And essential to the Congregational way of being Christian is encouraging the full participation of as many people possible in our decision-making and implementation. Full participation is essential to achieving the goal of being a Congregational Christian. Full participation is also an essential element of the beliefs, values and visions that we share.

If we are to create a more just, righteous, and peaceful world, then we need the full participation of as many people possible.

If we are to create a world with more compassionate people, more merciful and humane people, kinder people, then we need the full participation of as many people possible.

If we are to resist and overcome the oppressive, unjust and inhumane forces that are right now threatening to harm so many people in God's creation, that are right now seeking to build walls, to deny safe refuge to refugees, to strip people of their access to health care, to deny women control over their own bodies, to scapegoat whole religious and ethnic groups, and to set up obstacles that obstruct full participation in our democracy, then we need the full participation of as many people possible.

That's what we strive for in this church. It's essential to our goal of living out a vision of being progressive Congregational Christians. Full participation of as many people possible. Input in decision-making from as many perspectives and voices possible. Active participation in implementing our decisions from as many people possible.

Yes, that organizational form can be loose, messy and disorganized. It can make decision-making ponderous. It can make it challenging to get projects off the ground. But that just means we need more practice.

As a species, we humans need a lot more practice encouraging full participation from as many people possible to create just, righteous and peaceful communities. As a species, we're not yet very good at it. And it's precisely because we're not yet very good at it that this practice is consistent with our goal. We practice to get better. We practice because we believe the world needs more of what we're trying to get better at—full participation from as many people possible to create just, righteous and peaceful communities.

This afternoon, at our Annual Meeting, you're going to have an opportunity as Congregational Christians to practice. Please take full advantage of this opportunity. Participate as fully as you can. Let's discern together, discuss together, decide together and work together to fulfill the particular Christian vision that we share.