

Location, location, location

How can you account for context in the strategy of your ministry? Look for the places where the story of your ministry and the story of your community intersect.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2013

On a site visit to scout the location of a new building on a state university campus, the executive director of a state-wide campus ministry pointed to the pathways worn into the grass. If the proposed site was along the walking paths the students used, it might be worth investing resources to build a building. If not, the ministry would be stronger if we accepted the offer of free space in the church down the street.

This 25-year campus ministry professional was tutoring me, his board chair, on key elements to consider for the \$1-million deal. Of all the factors we considered -- such as projections for the growth of the university and the cooperativeness of the current administration -- the deal breaker was accessibility. If students would not walk by the building, it was useless to be on campus.

The executive director held a Ph.D. in anthropology and was a master at reading a context and incorporating this insight into strategy. As the ministry's board chair, I watched and learned as he interpreted the political landscape in our denomination, state government and higher education.

I don't know any leaders who believe that context is not important for ministry.

However, I know plenty of institutions that don't seem to account for the context in their strategy.

I was once interviewed as a candidate by a pastor search committee that indicated the church's top priority for the next pastor was to add young families to the church membership rolls. As the conversation unfolded, I asked about the community's

elementary school. Without a hint of irony, the search committee indicated that the county had closed the school because of low enrollment. The young families they wanted the pastor to recruit were leaving town to find jobs.

Many of the success stories in ministry can be attributed to a positive change in the context and a congregation's faithful response to those changes.

I asked a friend how the congregation he served had doubled in attendance over a 20-year period with a century-old building downtown and 20 parking spaces. "Downtown revitalized and became a destination," he told me. "We did faithful, good work at the church, but the key to the growth was what happened in the community."

Context includes the neighborhood and all the places where church members and institutional constituents live and work. A denomination whose leading congregations are in rural county seat towns may find the global trend toward moving into cities to be a particularly challenging contextual shift for both their congregations and the denomination.

Responding strategically to context requires at least three moves:

- Articulation of the mission and vision of the congregation and ministry in the form of a rich narrative that provides texture and gives clues about the capacity of the ministry to respond. Leaders need to be able to tell the story in sufficient detail so others can see the equivalent of the footpaths made by students on the college campus.
- Articulation of the story of the community or communities that the ministry serves. What sort of map or mosaic is presented? What are the trends that are leading to change? Leaders have to tell the story as if it is their own.
- Integration of the two narratives. Where do the stories create unison, harmony or dissonance? What is the institution's ability to hear and respond? In this move, the leader makes a case to build a new campus ministry center or to take the free rent at the church across the street.