

Merging Churches to Find Strength

by
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There is strength and power in numbers. Companies/firms all over the world comprehend this fully. That is why they engage in mergers and acquisitions to grow and gain market share, which, in the absence of antitrust measures, can lead to a very strong market position. The firms then use that position of power to control markets and optimize profits.

Although churches have at their center a mission somewhat different from optimizing profits, they too must pay attention to their bottom lines. Fortunately, churches and other non-profit organizations are not subject to the same antitrust restrictions as are for-profit firms. Therefore, they are free to take action to expand their sphere of influence and optimize whatever operational goal they choose: Saving souls, redistributing income, expanding health coverage, increasing educational attainment, reducing drug addiction, restoring community vitality, and so on.

If firms use mergers and acquisitions to broaden their influence and ensure success in achieving their operational goals, why do churches not use a similar tactic? It is not uncommon to see one denomination build a new church within the same community to compete with a similar denomination. In other words, Southern Baptist and Methodist or Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations will build new churches as a competitive tactic. Often this type of competitive behavior between similar denominations leads to churches that can barely maintain their existence and to the splintering of communities. An alternative would be for churches to merge or to be acquired by the stronger denomination. So why do we not see more mergers and acquisitions among churches?

The first-blush answer is that church doctrines and liturgies differ. I view doctrines and liturgies much the way for-profit firms view company philosophies and operational methodologies. For-profit firms, when they merge or are acquired, are able to blend separate philosophies and operational methodologies into a new, often better, philosophy and operational methodology. Could it be that different denominations could find a middle-road doctrine and liturgy to accommodate their newly merged memberships? It might be worth trying.

In an effort to build African American communities, and not splinter them, church mergers and acquisitions may be an excellent tool. Church mergers and acquisitions may supercede the benefits gained from constructing new church edifices that often stand idle. Also, the construction of churches often sends valuable resources outside of the African American community because the construction contractors are external to the community. Mergers and acquisitions could serve as unifying forces that would increase market share, expand already organized memberships, and give the church more power to optimize its operational goals—whatever they might be.

Divide-and-conquer schemes are appropriate when the objective is to control a growing and unorganized populace. However, when the goal is to build and unify communities, the better approach is one that involves consolidation. Consequently, church mergers and acquisitions appear to constitute an appropriate approach to making African American churches stronger and more capable of accomplishing their generally recognized goal: To make the African American community stronger.