

Do You Know the Story?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Poet and philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We can be tripped up by past dynamics that we know nothing about, and sometimes even by those we are aware of. For example, churches that began as the result of a church split are likely to have a residue of anxiety. Likewise, the distinctions present before a merger may never completely go away. As a child I was part of church which struggled for many years, until they received a large legacy which enabled them to build both a beautiful building and new programs, and attract many new people. In some ways they operated like a large successful church, yet the mentality of struggle still cropped up from time to time.

Our body cells renew themselves regularly, and yet our form stays essentially the same. Likewise, institutions cycle through people, and yet many of the patterns remain the same. Edwin Friedman used to say that instead of looking to fill a position you should just say, "We've got an opening for a passive-aggressive this year!" It's surprising how often these dynamics repeat themselves. One minister led her church through reorganization, and discovered that the new group responsible for church finances acted just like the old recalcitrant trustees. New people, new structure - same behavior.

Learning the history takes time. Pay attention as you lead - notice the stories that people tell about the past, and ask questions to increase your own knowledge. Many groups have some kind of written summary of their history. Read it carefully, looking for ways the patterns of the past may be present now. Look for strengths as well as pitfalls. When the leader stays curious about both the past and the present, he or she is better able to tap into the resources that are already present. We can make the best use of our own gifts and resources when we see ourselves as joining the ongoing life of the group, a life that began before we came and will continue after we leave.

Here are some questions that can help you as you learn more about the story you are part of. Sometimes it's worth asking them explicitly, at other times it's good to keep them in the back of your mind as you talk with people and read the information that comes your way.

What obstacles have been overcome, and how?

Are there programs, departments or positions that have historically gone smoothly or been problematic?

What is the length of tenure of leaders, and the circumstances of their departure?

Do you discover surprises along the way? Are there secrets that have been kept, and by whom?

What was the vision of the founder or founders?

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