

Real Denominations Serve Congregations

A Travel Free Learning Article

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By

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An Opening Word

The concept that *real* denominations serve congregations was hardwired into my life and ministry at an early age. I grew up in the home of a denominational servant—my father—G. W. Bullard. He taught me at the breakfast, lunch, and supper table, and while riding back and forth with him to denominational meetings, the fact that *real* denominations serve congregations.

My favorite of his concepts was that denominations who cannot serve all congregations give up their right to serve any congregations. For him this meant small, medium, and large congregations must be served. Inner city, neighborhood, suburban, town, and rural congregations must be served. Declining, plateaued, and growing congregations must be served. Conservative, moderate, and liberal congregations must be served. Congregations with a bivocational pastor, a full-time pastor, and a pastor plus staff ministers must be served.

But, they should not all be served in the same way. Each must be served in the manner that most significantly addresses their strengths and challenges, their opportunities and limitations, their gifts, skills, and preferences, and their kingdom potential. Trying to serve all congregations the same way can mean not serving any congregations well.

I found my father's insight into this situation to be accurate. It served me well during my 30 years of denominational service. I worked hard to create and sustain *real* denominations. In a time of denominational conflict, perceived denomination mediocrity, and assumed post-denominational atmosphere, this has not always been easy. At the same time, the quest for discernment, discovery, and development of *real* denominations is a worthy one.

What Are *Real* Denominations?

For the past several decades established Protestant denominations—particularly in the western or first world—have appeared to be in decline. Some have called this a post-denominational era. To the extent many people no longer look first to their denomination of heritage for spiritual, strategic, or leadership answers, this is a true statement. To the extent many people in search of a new congregation give low priority to the denominational label, this is a true statement.

If, however, consideration is given to whether the number of denominations or denomination-like networks and movements are declining, this is not true. As established, institutionalized denominations decline in size, diminish in their influence, and experience the leaving of congregations from their membership, new denominational forms are being created. Often these new forms are growing in number of congregations and total membership.

Perhaps the times are one of denominational transformation rather than a post-denominational era. If true, the challenge is something else. Relevance is a concept that comes to mind. At the same time that concept is rejected as shallow. Some see it as failing to understand the rich heritage of denominations.

How about the word *Real*? Let's test it to see if it fits and is helpful.

Real denominations are genuine, authentic, exceptional, positive, essential, and incarnational—to name a few characteristics. They are denominations who care more about making kingdom progress than the thriving of the denomination as an institutional presence.

Serving congregations is the *real* thing for these denominations. They design their strategies, systems, and structures with empowering congregations as their primary focus. They start with conversations with congregations, and then back cast from these conversations to determine their services.

Serving clergy by helping them increase their capacity to be spiritual, strategic, and relational leaders is part of the *real* work of these denominations. They focus on the continual preparation of clergy for an ever-changing ministry in a continuously transitional world. Healthy, vital clergy equipped to serve in a 21st century world is a core value of *real* denominations.

Serving Christ is the ultimate focus of *real* denominations. While this might be seen as a given in a Christian denomination, it needs to be mentioned. Denominations can fall into the trap of appearing to serve themselves rather than Christ. They do this when they feel caught in a downward spiral of vitality.

What are unreal denominations? Unreal denominations can be established denominations with a deep ethos, solid theological base, and strong sense of emerging mission. At the same time they may function in a manner where the thriving of the denomination is seen as more important than the thriving of congregations. The success of the denomination is a higher goal than making kingdom progress. Or, the denomination claims it is pursuing both denominational and congregational goals.

They may lose sight of the need to serve congregations, clergy, and Christ. When all these occur a denomination is definitely unreal, out of touch, in trouble, probably declining, and definitely irrelevant to the emerging 21st century ministry world.

Seven Practices of Greatness

Real denominations have seven practices of greatness. These focus around congregations, their leaders, and support services by denominations. This essay deals with the first practice, and will be followed by six essays, each addressing an additional practice. The first practice is so strong and so important that it is the title of this series of essays.

Following presentation of the seven practices of greatness, an eighth essay will be released. It will include an assessment inventory for denominational organizations to measure the strength of their service compared to the seven practices.

Practice One: *Real* Denominations Serve Congregations

The focus of *real* denominations is on serving congregations. Numerous observers indicate we live in a time of the ascent of congregations and decent of denominations. If true the response of denominations must be to rediscover congregations as the basic building block of denominational life.

For denominations to be successful in the 21st century, they must affirm they exist to serve the kingdom of God through congregations, rather than congregations existing to serve the kingdom of God through denominations. This cannot be said only with words, resolutions, or expressed in covenants. It must be the way *real* denominations function.

As *real* denominations serve congregations, they organize their resources, staff, and services around helping local congregations achieve excellence in ministry. They celebrate what happens in the life and ministry of congregations more than what happens in the life and ministry of denominational organizations.

In terms of resources, it is obvious their priorities are focused around congregations. This is seen by their theology, rhetoric, strategy, structure, budget, calendar, staff focus, and what they reward and celebrate.

I was on staff for fourteen years of a regional denominational organization who sought to embody the full spirit of serving congregations. It sought to transform as an organization by turning the concept of denominational service on its head. Its vision was expressed in the phrase *Empowering Churches to Fulfill Their Vision for Kingdom Growth*. Its motto became one of *We are Here to Serve Churches*. It intentionally turned the organization around 180 degrees and headed in a new direction.

It did not seek to increase loyalty and participation by congregations to the programs, ministries, activities, and budget of the denomination. Rather it sought to do whatever it could to help congregations experience qualitative and quantitative growth. It took significant risks to serve congregations at almost all costs. It launched various new initiatives around helping congregation serve with more vitality. It crafted a new dimension of leadership development. It reorganized its staff and their initiatives several times to attain an excellent level of service. Very quickly it became a model for other denominations seeking to transform.

For many years it concentrated on this new approach to empowering kingdom growth through congregations. Significant progress was made in both the congregations and the denominational organization. Taking a congregational-focused approach did not lessen the loyalty of congregations to the denomination, nor bankrupt the denomination. It had the opposite impact. Loyalty increased and financial contributions soared as congregations were served.

Do Not Serve All Congregations the Same Way: Denominations should not serve all congregations the same way. Some congregations are prepared for or are already engaging in excellent ministry. Some are not. Some congregations are dependent on their denomination for basic services. Some are not.

Real denominations are willing to make the hard choices to offer the best quality services, resources, and staff to those congregations who are already experiencing or able to achieve the greatest quality of ministry. They are also able to see the potential in congregations who are ready for a new dimension of kingdom service, but have not yet achieved it.

Often denominations come alongside these congregations and help them take the next steps. At the same time, *real* denominations are able to find ways to support congregations who are not ready to soar in ministry without spending too much of their limited resources on this support.

Several barriers exist to denominations making the decision to differentiate their service to congregations. First, is a Messianic complex whereby staff persons feel they can help any congregation reach their full kingdom potential. They cannot choose between those who are obviously able to excel and those who are not. They want to serve all congregations equally.

Second, many staff persons have a rescuer mentality whereby they feel they must help the weakest and smallest congregations in spite of the lack of capacity of these congregations. They feel they must rescue them regardless of whether or not these congregations really want to be rescued.

Third, the result is that many denominations refuse to prioritize their time, their budgets, and their other resources on the areas where they can have the greatest impact. They leave the door open for parachurch groups and non-denominational movements to focus on their high performance congregations. This leaves the low to average performing congregations as the ones most interested in services from their denomination.

Focus on Four Services to Congregations: *Real* denominations organize their services to congregations around four major areas of strategy, relationship, and program: church starting; faithful, effective, and innovative congregations; congregational transformation; and, church support.

Church Starting: *Real* denominations provide their sharpest services in the area of church starting. They facilitate the beginning of a number of new congregations each year equal to or greater than three

percent of the number of current congregations. They do not control the planting of congregations. They empower what ultimately may become a congregational multiplication movement.

Church starting, in the short-term, and a congregational multiplication movement, in the long-term, should be such a high priority focus for denominational organizations that the other three strategies pale in comparison. I am not saying they are unimportant. I am saying church starting, and ultimately a congregational multiplication movement, is the most effective means for a denomination to reach their full kingdom potential.

Denominations may move through four intensities of church starting. Intensity one is when the denomination starts some churches as the opportunity and need arises. No intentional strategy exists. The total number of churches started each year averages one percent or less of the number of churches already in existence.

Intensity two involves an intentional church starting strategy. It involves determining situations where new congregations need to be started, recruitment of sponsors or partners, discovery of church starting pastors, writing customized ministry plans, and building various resource bases. The goal of these efforts is generally to start a number of churches each year equal to two to three percent of the number of existing churches.

Intensity three is a denominationally-driven church starting movement. In this case, the movement really takes off and has energy of its own, but continues to be coordinated by denominational leadership. At times these movements can achieve a number of new churches per year equal to four to five percent of the number of existing churches.

Intensity four is a newly emerging dimension. In this situation highly missional churches ramp up their church starting capacity to where they are starting as many—if not more—new churches than the rest of their regional denomination as a whole. These movements are grassroots and create a network of missional churches and new churches that are self-multiplying. They have little or no dependency on their denomination for resources.

Faithful, Effective, and Innovative Congregations: Real denominations focus on those congregations who are faithful, effective, and innovative. They are faithful to the gospel and the ethos of the denomination. They are effective in their life and ministry as a congregation; making obvious kingdom progress. They are innovative, creative, and always learning in their methodologies.

These congregations represent less than 20 percent of the typical collection of congregations affiliated with a denomination. Further, these congregations, along with the new congregations, probably make 80 percent of the quantitative and qualitative kingdom progress within the denomination.

These congregations are also known as perfecting congregations. This means they understand what it means to reach their full kingdom potential and they are successfully traveling along a journey in that direction. They are the models other congregations seek to emulate. Perfecting, or faithful, effective, and innovative congregations need to make progress so congregations in need of transformation—the next focus—have a clear pathway for making kingdom progress.

Congregational Transformation: Real denominations focus on helping congregations who express readiness for congregational transformation as they move along a spiritual strategic journey in pursuit of their full kingdom potential. These are congregations, who tend to be at least a generation old, have fulfilled their founding vision, may be plateaued or declining, and have a sense of urgency and passion to transform. They need revisioning, revitalization, renewal, or reinventing.

Some congregations are ready to travel along a journey to pursue their full kingdom potential, and some need to engage in preparation activities to be ready. Real denominations recognize that only those congregations in need of transformation—who also express obvious readiness—should be the target of their efforts.

Those who demand help with transformation, but do not want to do the things necessary to prepare themselves spiritually, strategically, and in leadership drag down the overall kingdom progress of a denominational family. They also turn denominational efforts at congregational transformation into failed strategies.

Church Support: *Real* denominations find appropriate, loving, and creative ways to provide support to congregations who have become preaching stations or cultural enclaves. These are congregations who are significantly aging as organizations. Often they are not interested in transformation, and definitely not willing to do the things necessary to transition and change.

At the same time, these are among the most loyal congregations affiliated with the denomination. They are faithful in their financial gifts and attendance at denominational gatherings. If denominations let them, they will absorb all the time and energy of denominational staff. This leaves little or no time and energy to empower congregations with the capacity to transform, or those continually transforming who need the praise of their denomination.

Some of these congregations are providing high quality programs, ministries, and activities in one or two areas of the church. Others are simply presiding over the basic functions of church life without any obvious ministry excellence. A challenge is that churches needing this support are at times more than 50 percent of all churches in a denomination.

Function as Resource Brokers: *Real* denominations no longer try—if they ever did—to be the primary provider of resources for their congregations. They no longer insist they have the only true curriculum for Christian education, leadership development, governance, evangelism, church planting, and doctrine. Rather they become resource brokers who help congregations learn where they can get the best products and services that fit the unique needs of each situation.

Rather than spending their time producing enough different resources to cover the needs of their affiliated congregations, they become knowledge brokers and coaches. They build the capacity for wisdom among congregational leadership to figure out the best resources for their context.

They delight in connecting congregations and their leaders with the resources they need. They seek to be an interpreter of the effectiveness of these resources for the congregation. They also delight in connecting two or more congregations in dialogue about resources each has found helpful and empowering. They do not feel the need to control those conversations.

These denominations use interactive web sites, blogs, webinars, podcasts, teleconferences and other technology tools to connect their congregational leaders for dialogue. Because many of these technologies are borderless, they connect by these means with congregational leaders throughout the world and create a highly creative, dynamic, and timely dialogue.

Through multiple layers of denominational structure they figure out what resources can best be provided by the international, national, regional, or local organizational unit. They nurture a collaborative, rather than a competitive, approach to denominational partnership. Regions or local denominational structures develop resources that previously would have only been developed by national and international entities.

Discover Effective Models: Because of their commitment to be resource brokers for congregations, real denominations have a research and development component to their work. They discover effective models for helping congregations develop readiness for transition and change, and to continually transform.

They are also able to research the difference between organizational outputs and kingdom impacts. Outputs focus on measuring success through statistics that show if the denomination has increased participation and loyalty. Impacts focus on discovering indicators of increasingly effective service within the congregations and the context they serve.

They continually engage in networking activities across denominational, national, and theological borders to discover models that apply to the congregations they serve. Often the best models are congregations of a similar size, membership demographics, and contextual setting in another part of the continent and in another denominational family or a non-denominational congregation.

This means they are not always looking for the flashy model of congregation life. They look for the model that fits the congregations for whom they are seeking effective models. A ministry colleague, Bob Dale, has recently finished a book manuscript on what he calls perennial churches. These are churches who are not flashy models, but have a long track record of growing in quality and numbers year after year. They make some of the best models for many congregations.

Denominational staff persons often have the time and resources to do the research and networking that is not available to the majority of their congregations. They may also have the experience and wisdom because of their work with many congregations to know what models best fit their congregations.

Seek to Increase the Capacity of Congregations to Minister: *Real* denominations delight when they are able to increase the capacity of congregations to minister in their complex settings. They want congregations to be the heroes and experts, rather than seeking to create a dependency relationship between the congregation and the denomination.

This impacts the type and style of services they offer congregations. Rather than sharing information in a closed process—a little bit at a time—they know information and knowledge is empowering to congregations. They provide the type of learning experiences where congregational leaders develop the capacity to minister at deeper dimensions of Christian ministry.

They are not afraid for congregational leaders to excel beyond the capacities of the denominational staff. This does not threaten them. This does not make them feel their work and ministry is unimportant. It actually makes them feel they have given strong wings for congregations to soar with the gifts, strengths, and preferences that are God-given.

In a meeting with a denominational staff team one day, we were having a conversation about the empowerment of congregations. One staff member remarked, “If we do that then congregations might not participate in my program.” His view of the world said congregations ought to remain dependent on what he offered. For him it was job security.

Some denominations confuse polity or governance with dependency. In these denominations, their historic governance provides the denomination some measure of authority over congregations and clergy. They make the mistake of believing this also means they need strategic, program, and ministry authority over congregations. Such a belief stifles the creativity and potential of many congregations.

Develop and Support Peer Learning Communities and Best Practice Networks: *Real* denominations do not see themselves as the experts. They see their new congregations, their faithful, effective, and innovative congregations, and their transforming congregations as the experts. In light of this, the denomination initiates and supports peer learning communities and best practice networks among these congregations.

Peering learning communities are typically composed of pastors, or of pastors and key staff ministers. They meet face-to-face, and additionally network with one another through telephone conference calls, e-mail, blogs, and other direct communication vehicles.

While they might periodically have outside thought leaders or respected ministry practitioners speak to their community, dialogue among them is the primary learning motif. They may also utilize the services of a coach when they want to move from dialogue to action.

Typically peer learning communities are self-organizing and self-governing. Denominational staff can play a catalytic role in getting them together and in providing support services for them. However, denominational staff must not set the agenda for these communities, or use them to promote denominational causes that do not arise naturally from the participating clergy requesting additional information.

Best practice networks are a specialized type of peer learning community where pastors and staff ministers gather to share information on best ministry practices they are experiencing. They may also bring in other congregational leaders to share on specific areas of best practice, or visit congregations outside their tribe or culture from whom they want to learn.

Denominational staff can come alongside best practice networks. But, they must stand to the side to allow the development of practices and capacities beyond which the denomination is equipped to assist. Denominational staff persons who are trained and skilled as coaches can have a positive impact on best practice networks.

Offer Conflict Ministry Services: *Real* denominations offer conflict ministry services rather than conflict management services. What is the difference? Conflict ministry services focus on helping congregations develop the capacity during healthy intensities of conflict to handle more complex situations of conflict. These more complex situations require more directive intervention. Often there are no winners, but only losers in higher intensities of conflict.

Conflict ministry services produce winners among all participants in conflict situations. When denominations avoid and accommodate to conflict in their affiliated congregations, at some point a major, unhealthy conflict situation arises. At this juncture the chance for a comprehensive ministry approach is gone and only third-party management stands any chance of working.

Conflict ministry services involve education and coaching services for congregational leaders in healthy processes of decision-making. These education services focus on helping clergy and laity become aware of various aspects, approaches, and tools of conflict ministry. The ideal would be for this to be done within various networks throughout the denomination.

This would involve the development of education events or learning experiences for congregational and denominational leaders on conflict readiness. These would focus on an overall understanding of conflict, a general understanding as to what to expect at various intensities of conflict, and a specific understanding of getting congregations and networks ready to deal with conflict. A special emphasis is on what can be done in congregations to deal with conflict situations where conflict resolution is a genuine possibility.

Please note that of all the ways *real* denominations serve congregations, this is listed last. There is a great reason. The things denominations focus on or emphasize will produce more of the same. When denominations make conflict—particularly the management of conflict—a high priority, they produce more congregations in conflict. This is always an unintended consequence. But it still happens.

Coaching Insights

✓ Is your denomination a *real* denomination, according to the description given in this essay? If so, what are its *real* characteristics? If not, how would you characterize your denomination?

✓ Do you agree denominations need to be *real* in the sense expressed in this essay? If so, what attributes of a *real* denomination who serve congregations are most important to you? What do you value about the role and attributes of your denomination?

✓ What is your response to the first practice of *real* denominations? This essay proposes some differentiation or prejudice in the manner and extent to which congregations are served. What is your reaction to this proposal?

- ✓ How do you respond to the notion denominations need to do more coming alongside their congregations rather than seeking to voluntarily or through the connectional governance require congregations to function in a certain manner?
- ✓ To what extent do you see your congregation being dependent on your denomination? To what degree do you see your congregation being independent? To what level do you see your congregation as having an interdependent relationship with your denomination?
- ✓ Your reactions to this viewpoint on *real* denominations would be appreciated. Share any reactions with me at GBullard@TheColumbiaPartnership.org.

Important Things to Know

George Bullard is a Ministry Partner and the Strategic Coordinator with The Columbia Partnership. He is also General Secretary [executive director] of the North American Baptist Fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a leadership development emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.