



Redemption

Joining with A Congregation of Potential

One of the Ten “R” s for Plotting a New Congregational Course

Redemption is one of at least ten choices available to congregations who need to engage in transitions and changes that could lead to transformation as they plot a new course for their congregation. This is when a congregation’s viable and vibrant future involves joining with another congregation which has greater potential. In this choice a congregation aligns with a larger congregation with greater resources and allows them to guide the future for the congregation.

Some strategists call this a merger. It is likely better seen a relationship where a stronger more vital and vibrant congregation absorbs another congregation into its overall ministry. Whereas a true merger—called a **Reconciliation**—involves the creation of a new culture, with a **Redemption** the culture of the dominant congregation sets the pattern and the pace for the combined congregation.

A merger or **Reconciliation** at it best is an adult-to-adult relationship where each congregation contributes equally to the creation of a new culture. A **Redemption** is more a sibling relationship where one of the sisters or brothers takes the lead for the family with the good of all the family in mind. This happens with one sibling, for example, is power of attorney designee in a family legal situation.

Just as the lead sibling cares deeply for the entire family, so in a **Redemption** situation the lead congregation cares deeply for the one or more congregations entering a family relationship with it. Yet, someone must make decisions for the good of the entire family.

Decisions must be made about personnel, property, programs, and finances. The congregation being redeemed can negotiate the principles of the **Redemption**, but the day-to-day practices must be left up to the lead congregation. This giving up of authority is a very important decision for the congregation being redeemed and should involve much prayer and dialogue. **Redemption** agreements need time, an obvious love demonstrated between the congregations, and relationships that are built before a formal agreement is made.

Why Join with a Congregation of Potential?

Here are seven reasons for joining with a congregation of potential. Perhaps you can think of more.

1. Because your congregation is at a point of decision about the viability of its future in its location, with its current attendance, leadership, finances, and the aging of the congregational participants.
2. Because a great opportunity has presented itself for a congregation, and connection with a larger congregation of greater potential may allow for this opportunity to be effectively addressed.
3. Because the gap between the demographics of the congregation and its community context are too far apart, and there is a congregation with greater potential who has demographics more closely aligned with the community context.
4. Because an aging congregation realizes it can no longer keep up its programs, property, and adequate personnel, and desires for their facilities to be used in a more assertive missional way to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.
5. Because a congregation knows it may not still exist ten years from now with viability and vibrancy, and they see connecting with a congregation of potential as a way to have a more promising future.
6. Because there is a congregation of greater potential who cares about both your congregation and your community context, and they want to use the resources God has given them to bless both.
7. Because your congregation clearly discerns that God desires for you to do something that offers a much better opportunity for congregational life for the current congregational participants.

How Does a Church Join with a Congregation of Potential?

The “how” of joining with a congregation of potential is often more emotional than practical. It can generally work out well and does not take an extremely long time to happen.

1. As with all the choices available to congregation who need to plot a new course, **Redemption** must be both a spiritual and strategic decision. Care and concern must be expressed for all people impacted.
2. One thing that may make this choice easier is that it does not typically involve leaving the congregational facilities. It does involve negotiation based on common principles as to how the facilities will be used. Ultimately the real time use of the facilities will be up to the congregation doing the redeeming.
3. A courtship between the congregations should be part of the process. Praying together. Worshiping together. Having fellowship together. Dialogue about one another’s core values. Doctrinal discussions. Scenarios about the future. All of these should be agendas.
4. Dialogue about relics and traditions of each congregation and what is sacred, what is historic, and what is changeable is a key agenda item. Affirming the heritage and story of each congregation will be important.
5. One great way to talk about the future is to develop three scenarios of the future of the congregation ten years from now. This takes the dialogue away from a binary discussion of one way versus another way and creates dialogue about positive futures for the congregation.
6. For some time after the congregations join together there should be a worship service that connects with the congregation joining with another congregation. Existing classes and small groups need to be allowed to continue, while at the same time offering new groups for people.
7. Annually there should be an evaluation of how it is going. This evaluation should focus on signs of increased health and strength rather than what is not going well. It is important to focus more on where the congregation is headed than where it has been.

What is the Impact on the Church That Joins with a Congregation of Potential?

Here are seven possible impacts. There will be others you can name.

1. Often the congregation joining with a congregation of potential will not for a long time been captured by God’s empowering vision for them. One immediate impact may be the energizing power of being captured by God’s empowering vision.
2. The facilities of the congregation joining with a congregation of potential is often more alive with activity and that feels good. Yes, there will also be some anxiety about the change in the use of the facilities—especially in changes in the worship center or sanctuary. People who believe this is God’s church will not be as anxious. People who still believe this is their church will be more anxious.
3. It could be that worship is more exciting and engaging. Fellowship is more upbeat. Parking may become a problem and it was not before. Hospitality is more vibrant. A spirit of enthusiasm is more obvious.
4. The congregation joining with a congregation of potential may not have experienced a great sense of hope during recent years. Hope about the future is generally restored as the congregation is now part of something headed somewhere.
5. Resources may be more plentiful than in recent years. Finances are better. Staff are present to take care of programs and pastoral needs. The facilities are renovated and seem more alive and refreshing than in many years.
6. Not everyone will stay. Some people from the congregation joining with a congregation of potential will take this as an opportunity to go to a different congregation. They cannot handle all the transitions and changes, or they were holding on with the former congregation and now that it is going to be fine, they feel free to leave.
7. One impact is that the former congregation cannot go back to functioning as the former congregation. The lead sibling in this new relationship gets the right to make the final decisions. Not all their decisions will be perfect. The hope is that all their decisions will be both caring and loving.