



Is Your Church History a Static or Dynamic Force?

by Joe Arnold

Church history is a lot like gravity – it is always with us whether we are aware of it or not. While church history may seem unrelated to congregational leadership, those who attempt to change things soon discover that it lurks just beneath the surface. We have all heard the seven deadly words, “But we’ve always done it that way!”

Given that a majority of U.S. congregations are more than 75 years old, most church leaders must wrestle with history. Just as engineers take the force of gravity into account when designing a new structure, church leaders must seriously engage history when initiating change. And, like gravity, church history can be a static or a dynamic force, one that maintains the status quo or one that propels things in a new direction.

Maintaining Orbit

A congregation that engages history in a static fashion is much like a satellite in orbit around the earth. The force of gravity is always pulling the satellite in toward the earth, requiring that the satellite continuously alter its course *just slightly* to maintain its orbital track. In much the same way, a congregation often puts all its energy into minor adjustments that maintain a course revolving around the past. Sunday after Sunday the congregation gathers to worship surrounded by a whole array of assumptions and practices that remain unquestioned and untouched.

But course corrections and minor adjustments cannot sustain momentum indefinitely. Eventually, a satellite runs out of energy, succumbs to the power of gravity, and is pulled in by the very force that held it in place for so long. Similarly, congregations face an inevitable loss of momentum and decay if trapped in the lure of their past.

Swinging by the Past

Paradoxically, the same force that holds a satellite in orbit can also be used to boost and power it to new and higher paths. When a spacecraft is launched into the solar system, it swings around the earth and is hurled out into space by the force of gravity. It swings back around the earth again and then is hurled back out on a new trajectory with ever greater speed.

Just as a spacecraft uses gravity to boost its energy, a congregation can use its history as a dynamic force. Strategically revisiting history is a way to tell the story anew, to find hope and inspiration for a new future that is firmly connected with the past, but not trapped by it. A church that revisits history with an eye toward establishing a new direction must approach the past honestly and perhaps even critically.

Such a view of history will also require that sacred assumptions and practices be rethought. This is never an easy process. But serious, appreciative, and empathetic affirmation of the congregation’s history makes this process less painful.



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Changing Orbits

Isaac Newton's first law of motion is, "An object in motion stays in motion unless acted on by an equal or greater force." This law reminds us that change can be difficult. What is the "equal or greater force" that can allow an established congregation to use its history to build momentum toward a new course? It is a comprehensive strategy for change.

When history is engaged in the context of a broader process of visioning and strategic planning, it can become the force that propels new adventures. History can inform and empower an established congregation to achieve something new, while honoring the accomplishments of earlier generations. History can become an instrument of change, not an impediment.

As church historian in my local church, I have experienced the frustration of history being used as ammunition in disputes over everything from worship times to bequests. But I have also had the joy of helping people learn about the past for the sake of the future. We cannot undo our history, but we can engage our history as the opening chapters in the ongoing story of our congregation's witness to the Gospel.

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