

CREATING A CULTURE OF YES
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Every pastor recognizes the conversation that begins with, “Pastor, in our last church we did...”. From that opening line, the dialogue usually moves to a great idea that the person thinks should be tried or implemented here. Of course, the pastor recognizes that the initiator assumes the pastor will be the one who implements the great idea.

On the other end of that conversation the church member recognizes the response that begins, “Well, I’m sure that was a great ministry at your former church, but here we...”. That response signals to the initiator that their great idea is not being received favorably and the pastor is trying to find a tactful way to say “No.”

Over the years, in various church positions, I’ve been on both ends of those conversations, and I’d have to say that neither end is to be preferred over the other! So what’s a pastor to do when someone in the church comes to him with a great idea that they want the pastor or church to implement? And what’s a church member to do when all her ideas seem to be met with the attitude of “No, we won’t be able to do that here”?

At our church in Ramstein, Germany, we’ve talked about how to deal with those conversations in a way that maintains the pastor’s sanity and encourages people in the church to listen to and respond to promptings from the Holy Spirit concerning new ministries in the church. As with most international churches, we are blessed with people from all across the U.S. and around the world who have been members of some of the best churches on the globe. So, of course, they have experienced some phenomenal ministry ideas and are anxious to share those with our church, hopeful that we will want to implement them.

The dilemma this scenario presents is that this constant stream of ideas can become the controlling agenda for the pastor, staff, and ministry leaders as they get caught up in implementing many of these ideas. The result is that the church begins to look like a rudderless ship, moving in no set direction but simply following the ideas that are offered.

That’s the reason many pastors I know learn quickly how to just say no to all such ideas tactfully yet decisively. The unintended result is that over time the church develops what I call a “Culture of No.” That culture is expressed in an automatic response by church leaders to ideas or requests that seeks the quickest and easiest way to say no. As one pastor put it, “The more I say yes to these ideas, the more headaches they create for me. So I’ve learned to just say no.”

At Frontline Community Church we have a clear vision for what God wants us to be and do in this community. We don't want to get sidetracked from that by implementing every ministry idea that is recommended from the congregation. On the other hand, we don't want to embrace a "Culture of No" either. So we developed an approach to ministry ideas that allows us to stay on track with our vision while helping us create what we call a "Culture of Yes." Essentially the "Culture of Yes" lets us look for appropriate ways to say "Yes" to ideas, rather than our first response being a tactful and diplomatic "No."

The benefit of a Yes Culture in the church is that people are taught and encouraged to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and dream about what God may be asking them to do. This openness allows the Spirit of God to keep moving our church outside our personal and ecclesiastical comfort zones so that we continue to experience the fresh winds of the Spirit in our body. A Yes Culture also enables the church to grow and develop according to the Spirit's work within the body under the guidance and equipping ministry of the church leadership.

Essentially, a Yes Culture is developed by cultivating the predisposition to say yes as often as possible to ideas that are offered. In doing this we found it helpful to formulate four criteria that guide us in our quest to say yes. We regularly share these with our congregation and tell them that if any ministry idea they present passes these four criteria, they have an automatic "Yes" to develop that idea in and through our church. To make the criteria easy to remember and employ, we assigned each of them a word that begins with the letter M.

Monkey

The first criterion a ministry idea must meet is that the initiator and the idea cannot put a monkey on someone else's back. That American expression simply means that I cannot think up something for *you* to do! In terms of ministry ideas in the church it means that a person who brings an idea to me must be willing to own their idea and be engaged personally in making it happen. Too often the meaning of "Pastor, I think we should... (you fill in the blank!)" means, "Pastor, I think YOU should do my idea." I've told our congregation and leaders that we won't create monkeys for the backs of other people. But if a person is willing to own his ideas and follow the Spirit's promptings to explore them and engage others in joining the team, then he has passed the first criterion of receiving a Yes to his ministry suggestion.

Recently, someone in our congregation asked me if the church had ever considered sponsoring a support group for women who are dealing with infertility. Our women's ministry director and I sat down with her to hear more about the idea. She began by sharing her own emotional experience with infertility and told us that in the midst of her sorrow God was asking her to open her painful journey to others so they could walk through it together. She confessed that she wasn't sure anyone would come to such a group. She also wasn't sure why God was

asking her to be a part of it because she didn't have a finished story to share about how God has given her a baby. All she had, she admitted, was a faint prompting and a shaky faith that somehow she should obey and at least bring the idea to us.

My heart was touched as I listened to her story and was moved by her pain. I wanted so badly to say, "Yes, we'll take your idea and make it happen!" But I knew I couldn't do that. It would be stealing a blessing that perhaps God had in mind for her. So I took a breath and asked her, "And who are you thinking might get a support group like this going?" I was so hoping I'd hear the answer I needed.

She replied hesitantly, "Well, me, of course." I knew right then that she understood the first criterion that we won't create monkeys for other people's backs. Putting it positively, people need to be willing to step out in faith and follow the Lord's promptings to move outside their comfort zone and follow Him. Even with only a mustard seed of faith, she got that. So I could hardly wait to get on with the conversation.

Morality

Our second criterion for new ministries is that they must steer clear of anything immoral, unbiblical, or unethical. We don't want ministries becoming incubators for little cults or splinter groups, so we insist that every ministry stay away from moral, biblical, or ethical problems. I've never had someone admit to me that their ministry idea might not meet this criterion, by the way! But we still have it as a criterion because it reminds people that we monitor these things because we take the purity and protection of the church body seriously.

Money

I've heard lots of ideas offered that would only cost the church a small amount of money for start-up costs. I don't care how good an idea sounds; if the initiator asks for money to get started, it doesn't pass the *Money* criterion. It's not that we're stingy with our finances for ministry. In fact, one of the hallmarks of our church is its generosity. We simply believe that money follows ministry; it doesn't precede it. That means that a new ministry must prove its value and stand on its own feet before we will consider any future funding from the church. So "Don't Ask for Money" is a common expression I hear from people whenever ministry ideas are discussed. Our people get the message that money follows ministry, not vice versa.

Mission

The final criterion for a new ministry idea to receive an automatic yes is that it must contribute to the accomplishment of our mission and vision as a church. Our mission is simple (though not easy!) and that is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who love God and love the people He loves. Our vision grows out of that as we desire to see the mission accomplished by *Reaching* people with the love

of Christ, *Changing* them in the power of Christ, and *Sending* them into the world with the message of Christ. If a ministry idea will help us fulfill that mission and engage with our vision, we're open to it.

As I continued my conversation with the woman who wanted to begin an infertility support group, I asked her whom she had in mind to invite to the group. She said, "Oh, I think it would only be for women in our church who are struggling with infertility." So I asked her, "If my neighbor struggles with infertility, then you're telling me that I can't invite her to your support group?" She thought for a second, and then said, "Well that wouldn't be right! I guess I need to rethink that." The door was now open to more dialogue about how even something as personal and intimate as infertility can be used by God as an opportunity to reach out to lost people with the love and compassion of Christ.

By the end of that part of the conversation she had identified two women she knew who aren't believers yet whom she would invite to the support group. Initially, she hadn't recognized this ministry as a means for reaching people with the love of Christ. It wasn't until we talked about the criterion of *Mission* that her eyes were opened to new possibilities for what God was calling her to do.

So at the end of our conversation about the four criteria for a new ministry, it was clear that what the Lord was asking her to do with the infertility support group met every point. It was a conversation that lasted about 90 minutes and at the end our women's ministry director and I had the great joy of telling her "Yes!" and praying over her, asking God to take her mustard seed of faith and multiply it 10-, 50-, even a hundredfold.

I know that the Culture of No is sometimes an easier and more efficient way to operate in the church. I used to do it that way. But, thankfully, I've learned that easy and efficient aren't the right criteria for our obedience nor for discerning God's direction for the church. Saying "No" too quickly or for the wrong reasons only hampers the mission of the church as it stunts the growth of believers and harms the health of the church.

Far better is the time, effort and discipline it takes to cultivate a Culture of Yes in the church. Saying "Yes" for the right reasons will open our churches and our members to the great joy of living out their mustard seed faith and experiencing God's pleasure over their obedience to His voice.