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## **Networking Theory and Its Application to Autonomous Churches**

**Paul G. Thyren**

### *Introduction*

The inherent weaknesses of independent churches can be generally overcome by developing networks of churches. A church network consists of 2 to  $N$  churches whose vocational and non-vocational leaders meet occasionally to positively influence one another, share information and resources, and to engage in larger projects than a single church can handle. While the  $N$  stands for any number, it is most practical to assume that the working church network will be a cluster of churches in a given geographical area. Churches may go outside their cluster depending on their needs. A church on the west coast having the information or resources may help a church in the midwest. Vocational leaders are primarily the pastoral staff. Non-vocational leaders would be elders, deacons, and ministry leaders. If networking is not modeled by the vocational staff which is level one, it is unlikely to be practiced by the non-vocational leaders on level two. The levels were based on amount of contact I have with vocational or non-vocational leaders. My primary contact is with vocational leaders, therefore they are level one.

Lipnack and Stamps suggest that networks are essential when the scope is large and the size is small. "We need networks when we want to do more than we can do alone, achieving results across boundaries in circumstances we can influence but cannot control." (Lipnack 1994:152) Wisconsin Church Extension is a small mission with a large scope of ministry and territory. I

am able to influence churches, but not control them. The ministry is such that I know I don't have all the answers that pastors and churches are asking today. Networking should not only help us discover the questions, but also who among us has the answers. The matrix of influence can be exponential. Church leaders can influence church leaders who influence their congregations.

Why should leaders be bothered with networking at all? Consider the following reasons: 1) Relationships among ministry leaders need strengthening. One of the weaknesses among independent churches mentioned on a survey was the lack of meaningful relationships among pastors; 2) Leaders must assist other leaders in staying on task in church ministry. Another of the weaknesses was the general lack of accountability of pastors and boards. Church leaders should open themselves up to being challenged with the hard questions like "why are you doing that?" or "why are you doing it this way?"; 3) Leaders must be informed and stay abreast of our rapidly changing culture in the United States. Culture is changing more rapidly than anyone can keep up. Leaders need other people whom they trust to inform them of issues, dangers, and ideas that otherwise might not be known; 4) Each church leader has areas of specialty and experience that enables him to come along side a brother or a church to assist on a project. Churches need desperately to submit some things to other people for a word of wisdom and counsel. Leaders from another church can look at a proposal objectively and without emotional attachment to anything that may cloud their thinking on the proposal; 5) Churches need upgrading through appropriate changes. Change is difficult to accomplish in churches, but may be easier if trusted brethren from another church come and walk the leaders and congregation through the steps. I recently read two church constitutions that had been rewritten in the last two years. While the writers spent considerable time and effort, had they submitted a draft to a few leaders outside their group *and* been open to advice, the resulting constitutions could have been much better. Someone needed to have questioned the writers, "why do you want it this way?" or "do you realize the ramifications of the statement?" Although leaders may have good intentions, without a little outside help some projects may be out of their league. The width of their experience reservoir is narrow and the depth of their resource well is shallow (intentionally or unintentionally).

The shipping industry uses harbor pilots to guide large ships into port. The harbor pilot is not the captain and does not live on the ship. He comes aboard only to guide the ship through particular channels or harbors. He is a specialist in *that* harbor not all harbors. His ability is not a negative reflection on the ship's captain or crew. Clusters of churches can use one another's leaders as harbor pilots to guide one another through unfamiliar waters. The mindset of church leadership is bottom line to relational networking among independent churches.

Peter Senge, in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, suggests that,

...our organizations work the way they work, ultimately, because of *how we think and how we interact*. Only by changing how we think can we change deeply embedded policies and practices. Only by changing how we interact can shared visions, shared understandings, and new capacities for coordinated action be established. (Senge 1990:xiv)

The interaction of the parts within the whole revolves around people trusting each other. But trust alone is insufficient to change an organization. As Senge points out in the above quotation, we must change the way we think, i.e. our mental models of leadership, organization, and problem solving. Typically, leaders attempt to fix symptoms rather than causes. We are not generally trained to think systemically. Senge backs up to our childhood as he says:

From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to 'fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and 'subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price.

We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole. When we then try to "see the big picture," we try to reassemble the fragments in our minds, to list and organize the parts. But, as physicist David Bohm says, the task is futile—similar to trying to reassemble the fragments of broken mirror to see a true reflection. Thus, after a while we give up trying to see the whole altogether. (Senge 1990:3)

It is possible that a church, in trying to see itself, is merely

looking into the fragments of a broken mirror as programs, committees, and people are listed on an organizational chart. While people may be grouped together, could the group really be called a "team"? Good teams develop trust and working relationships wherein team members complement strengths and compensate for weaknesses.

The subtitle of Senge's book is "the art and practice of the learning organization." Churches need to become learning organizations full of learning teams led by learning leaders. It is possible, according to Senge, to have a team of committed managers with individual IQ's of 120, but a collective IQ of 63. (Senge 1990:10) Mental models and mindsets, defensiveness, lack of trust, poor communications skills, lack of team learning are but a few factors that produce a low collective IQ.

What does the relational networking of churches have to do with becoming a learning organization? Networking proposes new models and mindsets for the internal working of a church as well as external relationships. Genuine learning takes place when there is the intrinsic desire to "find out", and desire to "try it out". True learning is not arrival, but a journey of discovery. While there are absolutes in doctrine and in God's creation, our journey enables us to discover those absolutes from different vantage points and appreciate their magnitude. A church whose leaders are not willing to move toward becoming a learning organization is not going to involve itself in relational networking.

This paper will explore the following theory points: 1) Definition and description of organizational networking; 2) Five fundamental principles of organizational networking; 3) Trust is vital in relationships; 4) Network maps; 5) How hierarchy and bureaucracy fit with networks; 6) Barriers to networking; 7) The expert database; 8) Opening the organization.

#### *Definitions and Descriptions of Organizational Networking*

Over the last fifteen years numerous studies have been undertaken in the business community. Colin Hastings, a business consultant from London, uses the radar screen model to depict the dimensions of the networking organization. These are the four dimensions listed in the following table.

#### Four Dimensions of Networks

Dimension	Core Networking Process	Purpose
1. Internally driven	Networking <i>within</i> an organization	Crossing internal boundaries
2. Externally driven	Networking <i>between</i> organizations	Successful partnership
3. Technology driven	Hard networks	Connecting computers
4. People driven	Soft networks	Connecting people

(Hastings 1993:15)

Hastings uses the four dimensions collectively when he describes organizational networking. In a more formal statement, he says,

I see organizational networking as the implementation of a range of social, cultural and technological processes that result in a devolution of power and responsibility and the breaking down of organizational boundaries. This facilitates direct person-to-person connections, sharing of information and joint working (both within and between organizations) in order to pursue common objectives, solve problems and satisfy the expectations of internal and external stakeholders more effectively and rapidly. (Hastings 1993:14)

Within the scope of organizational networking, this paper primarily focuses on the external and people dimensions. (Internal networking of the local church organization would be a worthwhile dissertation project.)

David Limerick and Bert Cunningham (*Managing the New Organization*) mention the network organization as the new organizational form for the 90's and into the next century. Their idea is built around the key principle of collaboration. Collaboration implies "freedom and autonomy. The units that come together are independent and can choose to work with others or not." Collaboration also "implies that these autonomous units do work together toward a common goal." (Limerick 1993:16) Networks are also referred to as loosely coupled organizations.

If there is responsiveness (between the elements) without distinctiveness, the system is tightly coupled. If there

is distinctiveness without responsiveness, the system is decoupled. If there is both distinctiveness and responsiveness, the system is loosely coupled. A loosely coupled organization, in other words, asserts both autonomous distinctiveness and interdependence. (Orton 1990:205 & 218)

The IFCA Wisconsin Regional fits Hastings' idea of the external network dimension, Limerick's point about collaboration, and Orton's comments about the loosely coupled organization. We are a group of autonomous churches collaborating on a common goal of stimulating Biblical ministry and fellowship, serving one another, and starting independent churches. Distinctiveness and responsiveness are present in the organization, but we would have to admit there are churches and pastors that are decoupled from the rest because there is no responsiveness or fellowship.

External networking by definition occurs between organizations. At level one, we are attempting to see vocational leaders getting together for fellowship, encouragement, prayer, idea and resource sharing. At times we must ask two questions: 1) Who has a need that I can fill? 2) I have a need; who is able to fill it?

#### *Two Examples of External Networking*

Waukesha Bible Church, one of our Wisconsin churches, wanted to plant a daughter church. Having never done this before, the leaders and congregation had many questions about the process, the cost, and what it would be like losing people from the congregation. At my suggestion, the church invited two pastors whose churches planted daughter churches along with the pastors of the daughter churches to participate in a panel discussion that I moderated. We tapped into the good and positive experiences of two churches to help a third church do something it had never done before. The credibility of experience communicated by the panel members was much more effective as a teaching tool to Waukesha Bible Church than for me to simply tell what happened in both instances. The enthusiasm and feelings of the panel could not have been adequately communicated second hand.

Madison East Bible Church restructured their church government in 1995 from congregational to elder led. While the leaders changed the structure, they did not change the mindset

of the congregation. As a result, business meetings have not run smoothly. The pastor called to talk with me about the difficulties. I suggested that he get together with me and a pastor who has an elder led church to go over procedural areas that were causing problems at MEBC. The pastor and one of his elders met with me and the other pastor for a couple hours. We networked people who had the answers with people who needed the answers. One pastor acted as a harbor pilot to guide another pastor into a new harbor. With a new relationship established, if more questions arise, the MEBC pastor knows who to call.

#### *Five Fundamental Principles for Organizational Networking*

The theory for networking is well known in the business world. The five fundamental principles for networking are outlined by Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps in their book *The Age of the Network*. They are 1) unifying purpose; 2) independent members; 3) voluntary links; 4) multiple leaders; 5) integrated levels. (Lipnack 1994:18) Lipnack and Stamps have been network consultants for businesses for over fifteen years and have done extensive research on the subject. They picture these fundamentals as a Swiss army knife with multiple blades and tools. This section will apply the fundamentals to networking churches.

#### *Unifying purpose*

Lipnack and Stamps say that purpose “throws an anchor into the future”. (Lipnack 1993:200) Purpose sets direction in vivid and motivational terms as well as sets reference points for desired biblical results. The ownership of purpose presupposes a sharing of common values and basic philosophy of ministry. There is an adhesion factor of true fellowship because we are bound together by what we share in common. The IFCA Wisconsin Regional adopted the vision statement that has been discussed previously as a direction focus point for the organization without violating the purposes of individual churches. Senge suggests that there are seven possible attitudes toward a vision / purpose statement. (Senge1990:219)

<b>1. Commitment</b>	Wants it. Will make it happen. Creates whatever “laws” (structures) are needed.
<b>2. Enrollment</b>	Wants it. Will do whatever can be done within the “spirit of the law.”



3. <i>Genuine Compliance</i>	Sees the benefits of the vision. Does everything expected and more. Follows the "letter of the law." "Good soldiers."
4. <i>Formal Compliance</i>	On the whole, sees the benefits of the vision. Does what's expected and no more. "Pretty good soldiers."
5. <i>Grudging Compliance</i>	Does not see the benefits of the vision. But, also, does not want to lose job. Does enough of what's expected because he has to, but also lets it be known that he is not really on board.
6. <i>Noncompliance</i>	Does not see benefits of vision and will not do what's expected." I won't do it; you can't make me.
7. <i>Apathy</i>	Neither for nor against vision. No interest. No energy. "Is it five o'clock yet?"

In practical terms, commitment to the vision possesses energy and passion that cannot be generated by someone who is merely compliant. The apostles and early church leaders were committed people as evidenced by their proactive motivation to evangelize the unsaved and equip the saved for ministry.

#### *Independence*

"Independence is a prerequisite for interdependence." (Lipnack 1994:18) Each member of the network, church leader or church can stand by itself while benefiting by being part of the network whole. Men from independent churches highly value their independence and take their responsibilities seriously as church leaders. The International IFCA organization is composed of independent churches that have loosely joined themselves together. If the IFCA dissolved tomorrow, the churches would continue to exist and be fully capable of ministry because of their independence, i.e. they are locally owned and operated.

Stanley Herman adds a balancing perspective in the discussion of networking and interdependence. He writes:

The point is often made that the world has grown too complex and interdependent for individualism. But it is just this complexity and global linkage that require individualism if they are not to produce merely a renovated, technology-enhanced version of insensitive bu-

reaucracy. Connecting a series of poorly manufactured metal links, no matter in what length or pattern does not produce a reliable chain. Joining together a series of risk-avoidant, habit-addicted, turf-protecting functionaries is not likely to produce a team or network well prepared to integrate its efforts and meet the challenges of rapidly changing technologies or markets. (Herman 1994:7)

In order for a network to be healthy, it is imperative that the parts be healthy or at least be headed in that direction. Herman makes a valid point by saying that just linking people does not make a team or a network. At breakfast with a group of pastor friends, we talked about barriers to peer networking. A possible barrier surfaced. At times pastors need a support group as a "sounding board", but, as one of the men pointed out from his experience, it is possible that the attitude of pastors could become unhealthy because of continuous negativity toward their people and toward the ministry. Hopefully, the purpose of serving one another and multiplicity of leaders would prevent a network from going down. The independence of the members allows people to walk away from a bad network and survive.

#### *Voluntary Links*

Voluntary links are personal relationships and communication bridges. Personal relationships must be face to face at least part of the time. I believe in the theory that people work best with people they trust; they trust people they know; they know people with whom they spend time. All the books about networking used for this project emphasized personal relationships and trust. What could be more biblical? When we know other people well, we also know their strengths, weaknesses, and life experiences. Refer back to Herman's quote on the previous page. Linking the wrong people can be counterproductive.

Hastings makes an interesting observation about conferences. He says "conferences should be for 'conferring', but the sponsors of people coming to such conferences look for a program packed full of formal activities." "Very little attention is given to the design of the process at the conference to enable such relationship building to take place in other than a haphazard manner." (Hastings 1993:88) He concludes that conferences often fail to link people into relationships because there is no

time scheduled for structured, yet informal networking. Relationships should not be just in the areas of one's specialties. Crossing boundaries may prove to be beneficial in many ways. Once personal relationships are established, communication bridges may also be technical, i.e. phone, fax, computer, etc..

The six sections of the Wisconsin Regional generally provide the matrix for personal relationships to form. At least four different groups of pastors meet on a regular basis. With some, it is a social occasion with their wives; with others it is a time to talk shop and to pray for one another. The bottom line is that friendships are being established and trust is growing. Linkage does *not* come from the fact that we belong to the IFCA because some of the groups include pastors who are not members, but who pastor independent churches.

#### *Multiple Leaders*

Networks provide the matrix for multiple leaders. Everyone has a special contribution to make. When the discussion falls within the scope of your specialty—you are the leader. Lipnack and Stamps suggest thinking through the different leadership roles a team may possess: "visionaries, communicators, facilitators, practitioners, theoreticians, challengers, collaborators, and contributors all have their moment as the team process unfolds." (Lipnack 1993:207)

One morning at breakfast with a group of pastors, one shared how a number of people had recently left his church because of moves and other reasons. One of the other men commented that his church was at that point about a year earlier. It was not hard to see servant leadership surface. The first pastor invited the second pastor, one of his elders, and me to meet with his key leaders at his home one evening to talk through the emotions a church goes through in losing a number of families in a short period of time. The leaders realized that losing families is a common experience that churches face in a mobile society and in their location in the state. Relational networking took place, needs were met by experienced men, and the church was strengthened.

#### *Interactive Levels*

"Networks are *multilevel*, not flat." (Lipnack 1994:18) We normally think of levels with the hierarchical control mindset.

Levels do not necessarily mean control. Lipnack and Stamps suggest that “networks are organized in levels successive inclusion.” Small parts make up larger parts which make up still larger parts that make up the whole. (Lipnack 1993:52) In a departmentalized Sunday School, a teacher of the 2’s and 3’s class is part of the preschool department which is part of the children’s Sunday School which is part of the Christian Education ministry which is part of Grace Bible Church. An IFCA church is in a Section which is part of the IFCA Wisconsin Regional which is part of IFCA International. Wisconsin Church Extension, the Youth Committee, and the Ladies Fellowship are subsidiary organizations of the Wisconsin Regional that exist on the same basic level. Neither the Regional nor its subsidiaries have control over the churches. Since networks are multilevel, it is crucial to keep the levels *connected* and *interactive* through good relationships and communication up the levels as well as down the levels.

The application of the multilevel principle of external networking involves crossing traditional boundaries. In my position as the director of WCE, I can and have worked with people at all levels of a church: individual, family, committee, board and pastor, and congregation. I would be considered part of the church’s external network. Any church board or pastor can directly contact the leadership of another church, WCE, the Youth Committee, the Ladies Fellowship or the Executive Committee.

Lipnack and Stamps say that “empowerment” is the distinction between a network team that can act and a committee which merely recommends options. (Lipnack 1993:92) Networks put the power of decision making where the action is because the “hierarchy” is part of the network. If something needs to be done, the recommendation does not have to percolate up through the levels of hierarchy for a decision. Pastors meet in the different sections in Wisconsin not because they are told to do so, but because they want to. In meeting, they have basically empowered themselves as independent units to come together to accomplish things for their mutual benefit. It is important that the Regional Executive Committee encourage the others to catch the vision and benefits of networking.

While we have just considered the five fundamental principles of networking, the three *core* principles are purpose, independent members and voluntary links. The first two principles are already in place in the Regional. The voluntary linking is oc-

curing more often now, but we have not yet begun to explore the many ways we can help each other.

*Trust is Vital in Relationships*

The body must trust the pain receptors in the hand if it touches a hot stove and on the basis of that trust, take action. The body must trust the eye when it sees an obstacle on the sidewalk to take action not to stumble. Granted, human characteristics were assigned to the body in the illustrations. The Holy Spirit, writing through Paul, commands the Ephesian believers not to lie to each other, but instead to tell the truth because they were members of each other (Eph. 4:25). They were members of each other because they had been placed into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Tracing the "one another" commands through the New Testament and developing the variety of applications would help a church's membership function as the body they really are.

The word "trust" and "relationships" were often discussed in the context of business and corporate networking. Lipnack and Stamps title a section "trust one another: the key to joint ventures". (Lipnack 1993:122) Exploitation is a real threat in business networking as they exchange information, research, designs, etc.,. Hastings speaks of an unwritten code of conduct which includes a spirit of cooperation and trust. "For those involved in the network, trust means that 'entrusted knowledge' would not be misused, stolen, or leaked to third parties. Anybody being accused of such an act would rapidly become a leper in the field." (Hastings 1994:64) He also suggests that companies that are involved in internal and external networking work hard at fostering trust among all the participants.

What factors go into building trust among people? Limerick suggests that "trust is improved if the parties in the relationship clarify their obligations to each other, contract to fulfill those obligations, and allow mutual auditing of the operations of the contract." (Limerick 1993:106) Simply put, I need to tell someone what he can expect of me and then keep my word. If I am unable to keep my commitment or do something wrong, I need to honestly talk to the person, if possible, before he finds out another way. Believers in churches have been significantly devastated by people making commitments and not keeping them. On the other hand, many expectations are never verbalized to one another.

When the person fails to fulfill the expectations, the other person is hurt and trust deteriorates. Trust can either deteriorate slowly or be completely lost in a second. Unfortunately, when a person fails in obligations, he or she often moves to a defensive posture which further erodes trust and the relationship.

If internal and external networks are going to work successfully, trust must be at the foundation of the relationships. Time together, communication, personal honesty, and keeping commitments are key ingredients to building trust.

#### *Network Maps*

British Petroleum (BP) is one of many companies who have developed effective internal and external networking. One of their key team leaders suggested people draw network maps.

We ask people to draw (with themselves at the center) on a large sheet of paper all the key groups and individuals with whom they have contacts in order to get their work done. This includes people within their own organizations, within other organizations and institutions and also takes notice of the social and personal support systems and leisure elements that are a very important part of an individual's job success. (parenthesis mine) (Hastings 1994:70)

By piggybacking on the BP idea various network maps could be drawn. What people make up the pastor's internal church network and external network? His external map might include the church insurance representative, an attorney, counselors, mission leaders, etc.. What people make up an AWANA leader's network or a worship leader's network? Mapping a church's networks produces a ministry map showing where ministries intersect. We typically produce chain of command organizational charts. Some limited sample diagrams follow.

#### *How Hierarchy and Bureaucracy Fit with Networks*

It is not necessary to try to escape hierarchy and bureaucracy within an organization, but rather know their specific functions. Once again Lipnack and Stamps are helpful with the following scenario about the fire department which they say is among the most adaptive organizations for the 21st century.

Firefighting captures the headlines. The department

springs into action as a hierarchy when battling blazes. If your home erupts in flames, you don't want a group standing around trying to reach a consensus on how to approach the problem. The department acts as a bureaucracy that enforces codes for much of the day and makes certain that pressure is sustained in water lines, that training is updated, and that apparatus is maintained. A chief shouting orders is of very little use if the hydrant isn't pumping. Fire fighters often use person to person networking [in small groups] for fire prevention, which requires education, persuasion and role models, by working directly with people in the community. Fire departments forge large, interorganizational networks for mutual aid. Here local hierarchies use interlocal networks to achieve something together that they can not achieve alone. [brackets mine] (Lipnack 1994:33-34)

The hierarchy functions in emergencies when command and control is necessary. It also functions to set the overall vision, specific goals, and strategies. Hierarchy has vertical orientation. Bureaucracy functions to maintain standards and regulations, and to manage complexity with a horizontal orientation. Bureaucracy "often creates a new unit to solve a problem, instead of connecting people in existing organizations who probably have the answer. Then the 'problem' turns into a department." (Lipnack 1994:40) Because bureaucracy manages complexity on a horizontal plane, it is only a matter of time before the complexity outdistances the management's ability to keep up. This explains why bureaucracies become extremely slow, difficult to change, and reluctant to try anything new. Churches can slip into a bureaucratic mode as maintaining the organization becomes more important than meeting the needs of the people. Networks function for mutual aid, encouragement, education, innovation, and motivation. Networks are multidimensional.

Churches generally have a hierarchy in their leadership structure and a bureaucracy in their constitution, bylaws, and policies. Unfortunately, those two structures together can become oppressive and stifling rather than empowering and liberating for ministry. Both structures have the inherent factor of control. Church culture and traditional leadership thinking reinforce the idea of control. Servant leaders who know the organizational vision, goals, policies and regulations can lead networked

ministry teams. The leaders can empower their teams to set goals, make decisions, ask for help, or give assistance to other ministry teams without bogging down in the mire of red tape and forming a committee to look in to the matter.

#### *Barriers to Networking*

Networking does not just fall into place. There are barriers to overcome personally and organizationally. The first personal barrier is individualism. Hastings makes the following comments about individualism: "A final barrier to effective organizational networking lies in the western cult of individualism, in particular among men. Asking for help is seen and experienced as an admission of failure, while the person achieving the impossible by himself, is seen as a hero." (Hastings 1994:67) Proverbs says that through many counselors plans succeed (Prov. 15:22). While this begins as an individual problem, it becomes a corporate problem when the leaders within an organization all feel this way. In my estimation, lack of teachability and unwillingness to ask for help are two major problems in churches. It is possible, however, church leaders do not know who to ask.

A second individual problem revolves around a sense of loss of traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic forms and comfort zones. People need to take responsibility for their decisions and actions at the appropriate levels. Church boards, while needing to know what is going on, do not need to have a decision finger in every ministry pie. Progress grinds to a halt if the board has to do everything and it frustrates the people. If a missions committee goes through all the work of developing a proposal for missionary support and the church board tinkers with it until it bears only a faint resemblance to the original, the board may as well say to the missions committee, "we don't trust you to do this right."

One of the organizational barriers to networking is "permission". According to Hastings, people fear crossing the organizational boundaries. Fear is produced when people go to someone outside their department for information and are challenged with "why do you want it?" instead of "yes, how can we help?" (Hastings 1994:68) In my travels, I have often heard the comment, "we don't know what is going on, the board never says anything." There are occasions to keep confidences to be sure, but the board should at least tell the congregation or the person



asking that they are not at liberty to talk about a situation. If there is a process going on and the board does not have enough information, they could let the congregation know what to expect and when to expect an answer. The “board” seems to be a boundary that is difficult to cross in some churches. At times people must get permission to ask for help from outside the church. I have mediated a few conflict situations for churches. It is amazing how long the decision-making process takes for a church to request help. So barriers to networking can be from within individuals or they can be part of the systemic mindset of the organization.

#### *The Expert Database*

When I first began thinking about networking, I had envisioned the possibility of listing the strengths and experiences of churches in a database. If a church had a difficulty in an area, I could search the database and link them with someone who could help them. Colin Hastings’ book dealt with the idea as it was explored for business purposes. My idea obviously was not new, but more importantly, it is not possible. There is the double bind of not knowing *whom* you don’t know and not knowing *what* you don’t know. Our experiences are so wide and diverse, a person could not begin to know what to put down on a form asking areas of expertise. It would be more difficult for churches as a whole to identify their strengths and giftedness for the purposes of a usable database. At least I know now that it is not worth the time and effort to try the database idea.

A viable alternative to the database is in wide-scale networking. Pastors could ask for help within their section networks, but go beyond that as the men in their network might be able to ask the question in other circles. Going on-line through computers may be another way of asking for information or help. Of course the nature of the need and how fast you need the help will determine the method you use.

#### *Opening the Organization*

BP decided to transform itself into a corporation with a networking culture. As they looked at what they were and what they wanted to become. Their results are summarized in the following table.

Old Culture	Open Culture
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hierarchies</li> <li>• Boundaries</li> <li>• Internal focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teams</li> <li>• Connections</li> <li>• External focus</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smothering</li> <li>• Second guessing</li> <li>• Controlling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Trusting</li> <li>• Supportive</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis</li> <li>• Fear of mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action</li> <li>• Calculated risk taking</li> </ul>

(Hastings 1993:168)

I would personally prefer to be part of the open culture organization. The list of words in the right part of the table, even though developed by BP, reflect a more biblical approach to ministry. BP also took the acronym OPEN to describe their organization. I have modified it slightly and applied it to ministry for my purposes in WCE as I encourage churches to make cultural changes to improve their ministries. The OPEN Organization page follows this page.

**The O P E N Organization.** Hastings, *The New Organization*, p.168

Open thinking—is being braver and wider in our thinking processes

It is ...

- going beyond our traditional ways of thinking
- looking for fresh approaches to improve ministry
- looking outward more and inward less
- challenging the status quo

Results ...

- openness to the ideas of others
- creative problem solving
- a willingness to challenge traditional ways of doing things
- a shift to strategic as well as tactical thinking
- wider horizons of ministry

Personal impact—is influencing others through personal ex-

ample and recognition  
of their needs and aspirations

It is ...

- the ability to influence the actions and attitudes of others through personal example
- recognizing the needs and aspirations of other people
- Results ...
- increased awareness that any individual can make a contribution
- working relationships are built on understanding, trust and support

Empowering—is improving skills, capabilities and commitment at all levels

It is ...

- enhancing everyone's skills, capabilities, and commitment
- sharing the work load
- seeing leaders developing the direction, measurable goals with people, and providing support and follow-up

Results ...

- improved cooperation, commitment and enthusiasm for the ministry
- clearer accountability and expectations
- focused energy for implementing vision and values

Networking—is sharing information and resources

It is ...

- making and using relationships with others to help get things done or done better

Results ...

- commitment to and ownership of goals by using clear, effective, and sensitive communication

- a greater understanding of the value of interdependence

**In Summary:** The IFCA Wisconsin Regional has some of the components of organizational networking already in place. The scope of this paper focuses on Wisconsin, but the principles would hold true for other groups also. Looking back over the principles in this paper we see the following essential points.

- Churches and pastors are independent members capable of standing on their own. They are loosely coupled by being distinct from one another, yet responsive to one another.
- The Regional has a vision or purpose statement. It is becoming more widely owned by the pastors. It needs to become part of the mindset of church leaders as well.
- Organizational networking relationally links independent members around a common purpose. Each member of the church network has something to gain and something to contribute to the whole making the whole greater than simply the sum of the parts. Personal relationships take priority over technical links.
- Personal relationships built on trust are crucial to a healthy network. Trust is built in relationships by spending time with one another in social settings as well as work settings. It is also built when we make commitments to one another and keep them.
- Networking wisely used in conjunction with hierarchy and bureaucracy will contribute speed and flexibility to the organization. Organizations would benefit by drawing internal and external network maps.

For organizational networking to occur, men must have the vision and courage to adopt new mindsets, to lead as servant leaders and to overcome the barrier of the type of individualism that refuses to ask for help.

Writer

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