

# And the Two Shall Become One



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by Luann Yarrow

## Congregational Mergers Present Opportunities for Growth--As Well as Unique Challenges

With a slew of bad economic news for businesses lately, it's no surprise that faith communities are also feeling the effects of the poor economy.

Although there are few statistics on how congregations are being affected by the recession, many have felt the pinch for quite some time. And like failing businesses, many congregations are weighing their options—including merging with other houses of worship.

Alice Mann, senior consultant at the Alban Institute, says a congregational merger is "a strategy for dramatic change." She strongly encourages congregations to look at all their options before considering a merge so they'll be very clear as to whether a merger will be beneficial. As she points out, mergers are universally stressful situations, and they usually demand much more change than the people involved ever anticipated.

"Readiness" is a key component when considering a merger, and according to Mann, it involves four things:

1. Do the people involved really believe there's an urgency to do something differently? There must be more than three or four "eager beavers" who want change. The congregation must be prepared. Communication must be open and transparent, and a majority of the congregation must be supportive of the merger and all it could entail—including possible new leadership, a new location, and a new style of worship.
2. It is critical for congregations to do a self-assessment. They must be aware of the internal dynamics, strengths, foibles, styles of communication, and interpersonal relationships that are affecting the congregation. This knowledge will be extremely important when deciding whether a merger is the best option. It will also help them to know what type of congregation would be best for them to merge with.
3. Armed with the knowledge from their self-assessment, Mann says the leadership then ought to weigh all possible options—other than a merger. If congregational growth has reached a plateau or finances are challenged, would it help to change locations, leadership, or worship styles? Is it time to consider a "holy death" for the congregation and allow members to find a new church or synagogue?

4. Finally, before considering a merger, it must be determined whether the congregation and leadership are fundamentally focused on God's mission in their community. Mann says that most positive merger experiences involve people who are more committed to the continuity of their faith than the building. Many find it difficult to separate their ministry from the building, and that can cause problems later in the process.

After a congregation decides to move forward with a merger, practical, legal, and heart issues must be addressed.

### **Practical issues**

"Congregational merger" is a far-reaching term with many possible variables. In some cases a stable church or synagogue will absorb a struggling congregation, in which case one party simply closes its doors and there are no negotiations to speak of. However, sometimes the receiving church will go to great lengths to welcome the new congregation, incorporating some of their traditions and even taking on their staff.

Another common scenario is when denominational officials decide to take two or three struggling congregations that are geographically close and combine them. While this may seem like a quick solution to financial woes, Mann warns that this situation can have a negative outcome. In her experience, the factors that contributed to the state of these churches, unless resolved, can multiply when other struggling congregations are joined.

Mann says that in this type of case it's often better to move the strained congregations to an entirely new location, call someone new to lead, and give the merged churches a new name. This increases the likelihood of survival.

Cluster churches and cooperative ministries are also becoming more common. In these situations, congregations maintain their separate identities—and even locations—but share ministry resources as well as their rabbis or ministers. They combine groups such as youth and elder care, and they may pool administrative staff.

However, if the cost of maintaining a large or aging building is putting a burden on congregational finances, cooperative ministries may not be the best solution. Also, some congregants may feel they are not getting the attention they once received, and clergy may feel overwhelmed with the additional responsibilities this approach requires of them.

### **Legal issues**

There are many legal issues involved in a church merger, and Mann says it is very important that all parties seek legal representation so that everything remains above board.

If a church is part of a denomination, it must seek denominational approval and determine whether the church property is owned by the denomination before proceeding.

Bequests to the congregation will also have to be dealt with. In some cases, inheritances may revert to another heir if any changes are made. The leadership should find out what valuables, if any, were inherited.

In addition to bequests, all gifted items should be made transparent. It is critical to communicate with congregants so that gifts to the church find a new home that is suitable to the giver, and nothing is lost in the transition.

Finally, decisions must be made concerning the new entity. Will it be a continuation or will incorporation papers be necessary? If it is renamed, what will the legal consequences be? These answers will be specific to actual congregations, so legal representation is a must.

### **Heart issues**

Probably the biggest issues involved with a merger are matters of the heart. When two congregations are joined together, blessings are multiplied, but for the sake of unity, some things may also be sacrificed.

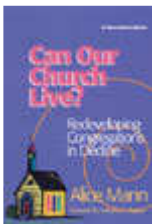
Communication through town hall meetings, e-mails, and verbal updates during the weekly worship service are vital. Congregants must understand why change is necessary in order for them to support it.

A congregational merger can bring about changes in worship style, music, leadership, and traditions unique to a local church or synagogue. These issues can be deal breakers—or deal makers—when people of faith choose a house of worship. If the congregations involved take ownership of the idea to merge, a successful transition is likely, and everyone will benefit.

While there are many scenarios to consider and several challenges to overcome, successful mergers are quite possible to achieve. Resources such as books, seminars, and private consultations are readily available, and leaders who utilize them will greatly increase the chance of success.

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## **FEATURED RESOURCES**



[Can Our Church Live?](#)  
[Redeveloping Congregations in Decline](#)  
by Alice Mann

Nothing on earth lives forever--not even congregations. Alban Institute senior consultant Alice Mann explains how the natural life cycle of a congregation, as well as other internal and external factors, can produce a congregation that is in real trouble. She then offers hope for congregations that want to change. Practical options for congregations, leadership challenges for laity and clergy, and ways to work with denominations are detailed, and engaging discussion questions provide a basis for congregational planning.



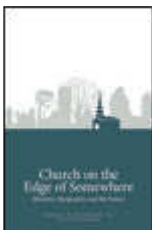
[Ending with Hope:  
A Resource for Closing Congregations](#)  
by **Beth Ann Gaede, Editor**

*Ending with Hope* grows out of the understanding that although closing a congregation is in many ways about dying, it can also be about new life. Closing a congregation does not have to be about failure but can be about redirecting resources for new ministry.



[Cooperating Congregations:  
Portraits of Mission Strategies](#)  
by **Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig, William O. Avery**

Transitioning communities are challenging congregations to develop unique, creative strategies for remaining open for ministry. Based on an intensive study of five cooperative ministry ventures, this thought-provoking book looks at how each takes a unique approach in addressing its own mission context.



[Church on the Edge of Somewhere:  
Ministry, Marginality, and the Future](#)  
by **George B. Thompson, Jr.**

George Thompson asks congregations to explore the meaning of being *in* the world but not *of* it—a church on the “edge of somewhere.” Thompson envisions a church that is deeply engaged in ministering to the community while calling on others to commit to doing the same. By analyzing the interaction between a congregation’s focus of identity and its stance with the world, Thompson helps congregations see where they currently stand so that they can discover where they must go in the future to fully live out their call to be God’s people in the world.

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