

Overview of the: Florida Ministries Consultation Ministry

Often churches get busy doing business as usual and can benefit significantly from persons outside the church providing some level of assessment of the church. This makes some pastors and church boards anxious because it is uncomfortable to go through this kind of critique. But if a church is committed to making a difference for the kingdom, the risk is a chance they are willing to take.

Florida Ministries of the Church of God is using a consultation approach developed by a number of consultants and refined by Paul Borden. Our approach is more of an intervention than a consultation. But “intervention” can create anxiety, so we use “consultation” to describe it. Our primary goal is to intervene in the life of the church and empower the church to become outward focused. Most Church of God congregations in Florida (other states as well) are inward focused. The people in the church see themselves as the customer and believe the ministries and the church staff exists to serve them. Generally, it is acceptable for new persons come to the church and become part of it as long as they buy into this paradigm. The intervention challenges the church to see itself as existing for persons who are not part of the church and do not know Christ yet.

The consultation focuses on assessing the health of the local church (using outward focused measures), identifying a detailed growth plan, coaching follow-up and accountability for the pastor and leaders. Consultants often generate reports that are partially implemented because the pastor and/or the leaders are not sure how to fully implement the recommendations or unable to overcome systemic obstacles. Our process realizes that the key to significant change in existing churches results from intense prayer, identifying systemic growth obstacles by a team of experienced coaches and then an ongoing relationship with a coach who works with the pastor and the leaders to implement the recommendations and guide the church in becoming outward focused.

The consultation process involves the church leadership (not the pastor) completing a congregational self-study. Various parts of the self-study can be assigned to leadership personnel (or others in the church) to be completed. It is critical that all of the requested information be supplied or it delays the process. Once the self-study is received at the Florida Church of God Ministries (FCOGM) offices, a consultation date is scheduled with the church. If a church is in considerable crisis and the consultation is our recommendation for how to address the crisis, we adjust the scheduling process a little in order to engage the church in the consultation as soon as it is reasonably possible.

The Florida Church of God Ministries coaching team (comprised of ten uniquely trained and experienced men and women) spends time individually and as a team reviewing the self-study data. Some preliminary questions are developed and issues to be explored are identified before any onsite visits are made. The intercessory prayer team is notified of such issues and asked to pray specifically for these issues and during

the onsite visit. The consultation team (approximately three to five persons) is identified from the coaching team based on availability and expertise needed.

Depending on the size of the church, the onsite consultation may be a two or three day event. If the church averages less than 50-75 people in morning worship, the consultation event will likely begin on a Saturday during which the consultation team interviews the pastor (if the church has a pastor), a focus group of approximately 15-20 persons from the church, and the governing board. Typically, a lead consultant is designated to primarily ask questions in these three venues. There is also a time of teaching integrated in to the meetings that is a two hour block of time that focuses on the church life cycle and the role vision, relationships, ministries, and structure play.

If the church is larger than 75 persons, the consultation event usually begins on a Friday with one-on-one staff interviews (usually just full-time staff) and the focus group is conducted on Friday evening. This allows additional time to meet with the church leadership on Saturday morning. The life cycle presentation follows on Saturday afternoon and is also open to the entire church. We find that persons who are exposed to the life cycle concepts are often more receptive to the consultation recommendations. The Sunday schedule is the same regardless of the size of the church.

In some churches (such as churches experiencing conflict or stress) we identify a predetermined number of 30-minute individual or couple interview slots (the Thursday prior to the consultation and the Friday morning of the consultation) for which people can sign up. We allow them to talk about whatever they want to talk about. In other churches we have also added additional focus groups on Friday night that meet simultaneously and are led by persons on the consultation team.

The consultation team meets on Saturday after the meetings are completed and begins developing a report that identifies approximately five assets of mission, five liabilities, and five recommendations that correspond to these liabilities. The lead consultant writes the report (approximately four pages) on Saturday night. He presents the report to the pastor and reviews it with him on Sunday morning so the pastor is informed in advance what is to be shared with the congregation after the morning service. The lead consultant preaches a message during morning worship that is designed to expand the congregation's vision so it is outward oriented and to prepare them for the consultation report. Guests are invited to leave at the conclusion of the morning service. Then a copy of the recommendations are distributed to each family and, the consultant walks the congregation through the report. Additional commentary is provided as needed for clarity. This presentation normally takes 20-25 minutes. At the conclusion of the presentation, everyone is dismissed.

Congregations often have questions about various recommendations, especially if the congregation is already in crisis. The consultant offers to meet with the church leadership or the whole congregation (leadership is preferred so that they can clarify the recommendations to the congregation) to field questions. Congregations often ask detailed questions related to implementation of the recommendations. We generally shy away from implementation responses and focus on the recommendation;

implementation questions are addressed later in the process.

Two weeks following the consultation weekend, the congregation has a special called business meeting to vote on the recommendations. Some congregations have a question and answer meeting about the recommendations prior to the day of the vote and some do it on the day of the vote. If the recommendations are not approved, the process is completed. If the congregation approves the recommendations, they enter the covenant phase.

If the recommendations are adopted, the consultant prepares a church health covenant that delineates the responsibilities and commitments of all parties involved in the covenant (i.e. FLCOG Ministries, the consultant, the lead coach, specialty coaches, the senior pastor, the church leadership and the congregation). The covenant also identifies any special needs or commitments, such as financial assistance provided by FLCOG Ministries. The covenant is written specifically for the recommendations that were identified and adopted. A week is allowed for the development of the covenant. However, if the lead consultant believes the recommendations are likely to be adopted, the covenant may be prepared earlier.

We've found that it is very helpful for the consultant to meet with the church to answer covenant questions in advance of the church vote on the covenant. Church members and even leaders (pastors are not exempt) are sometimes fearful that their church is being "taken over" by FLCOG Ministries. If the church is not safety deeded (conditionally deeded) to FLCOG Ministries, we require that it be in order for FLCOG Ministries to invest the money and coaching resources called for in the covenant.

If the congregation approves the covenant, a coach is assigned to the church and the implementation process begins. If the recommendations and covenant call for bylaws changes (such as suspending present bylaws and adopting a governance model), then the vote to adopt the covenant must meet the present bylaws requirement for a bylaws change. Often that is two-thirds or three-fourths of members voting. If the covenant passes, such bylaws are suspended immediately and a transitional structure is implemented to prepare for a new governance board. If the covenant did not involve bylaws changes (we've not had one yet that didn't), then simply majority would be a sufficient vote to approve the covenant.

The two-step process (adopting recommendations and approving the covenant) takes four to six weeks and may seem too time consuming. However, we have found that this period allows the consultant to be present with the church two or more times and to continue building trust with the leadership and the congregation. By using the same consultant to lead the consultation, preach on consultation Sunday, and answer questions regarding the recommendations and covenant, a sufficient level of trust can develop with the congregation so that they are willing to take a chance and adopt the covenant even if some have reservations about it.

If the covenant is approved, the coaching relationship begins immediately. The months following the adoption of the covenant are critical since enthusiasm, hope, and cooperative spirits are usually running high. Therefore, changes are relatively easy to

implement. The coach assigned by the FLCOG Ministries Coaching Team meets with the pastor monthly to coach him or her regarding the implementation of the recommendations. Depending on the church (conflict and leadership dynamics) and the level of expertise of the pastor, coaching may also involve regular sessions with the transitional and with the new governing boards. The coaching relationship is for three years. At that point the congregation or FLCOG Ministries can discontinue the covenant relationship. The goal during this three year time period is to help the church become healthier and to expand the Kingdom of God.

After the covenant is signed, a meeting is set up with the pastor, leadership of the church, the coach and FLCOGM staff member to review the recommendations in the covenant. Emphasis is placed upon knowing who is accountable for each step. This “handshake” meeting is to ensure that there is no miscommunication during the process. God has repeatedly blessed these relationships with church health, growth and lives in the Kingdom of God. Often miscommunication during the three years caused tension which has now been eliminated with this step.

There is no cost to the local church for the consultation. FLCOGM pays for this out of the budgeted operating expenses of FLCOGM. The covenant does include the church giving five percent of its budget giving to FLCOG Ministries (which is what we ask all churches in the state to do). FLCOGM also underwrites the expenses related to coaching the pastor and the church leadership. All implementation costs and who pays those costs are identified in the covenant. In some cases FLCOG Ministries may pay for certain ministries to get started, while in others it would be the church’s responsibility. These costs often include purchasing needed materials, pastor business expenses for travel, and the cost of the pastor to be involved in a Maximum Impact group, as well as other expenses.

Cluster learning experiences are a monthly gathering of pastors whose churches have entered into a covenant relationship with FLCOG Ministries. Pastors of churches that average less than 100 are grouped together in a learning cluster and pastors of churches larger than 100 are grouped together. Pastors who have led similar sized churches to health and growth coach these clusters. These learning clusters provide a monthly time of training and leadership development (in addition to monthly coaching) and an opportunity for pastors to learn from and encourage each other in recommendation implementation. Outside resources trainers are brought to help these groups approximately three times a year. Some of these resource speakers in the past have been Reggie McNeal, Al Eills, Jim Griffith, Gary McIntosh and John Jackson. Each of these speakers brings a unique thrust in our efforts to build healthy churches which are transforming their communities through seeing more people come to Christ, building them into fully devoted disciples, developing leaders and launching new congregations.