

## ***Flock of Geese***

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January 31, 2010

*Where there is no vision, the people perish.* —Proverbs 29:18

Reading: Ephesians 4:1-16

It was a cold, grey morning. The sun was just coming up, so it was dusk—quiet and still. I was walking along when suddenly from the ground arose this great mass of beating wings. And my heart stopped until I recognized this for what it was—a great flock of birds.

I stood there for a moment and watched them before I got into my car. It was amazing. They quickly rose, made a sharp turn, and flew around the big tree. Then they veered directly toward me, flew over the houses and then were gone. It was almost as if they were tied to each other with string, the way they moved. The way they turned and dipped, this looked like a single creature—like a super-agile stream of protoplasm in the air. It was incredible how they moved together like one body, the way they knew where the other ones were going. They *were* connected, somehow, in order to move like that—fluid and graceful. It was like a beautiful dance—choreographed by an invisible hand and faithfully practiced.

It was Paul who often spoke of the church as if it were one body. He said,

*We are to grow up in every way into the one who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, Promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.* (Eph. 4:15-16)

This is a wonderful image. But it is so far from our Western lifestyle that it may no longer make any sense for us. We are such a highly individualistic society.

And I suppose that it might be easier for us to imagine ourselves as a bird, the ultimate symbol of freedom, than as a mere body part such as a blood cell, which wouldn't survive or even make sense without the rest of the body.

In Eastern or ancient Jewish thought, there was no problem with the image of the body, because for them, the emphasis was always upon the community and not upon the individuals. It was Western thought that turned this upside down and emphasized the individual soul. So it might be helpful, if we are going to understand Paul, to use *other images* in order to grasp this Eastern concept of the body.

Perhaps a flock of birds is easier for us Western thinkers to comprehend. It is true that we are all distinct, separate individuals, to be sure. But we are also so much more. Indeed, we depend upon the rest of the flock for protection, nurture and survival.

Paul, among other things, was an organizer; he was an administrator. And much of what he had to say to the churches, past and present, had to do with principles of organization. Implicit in what Paul said was a very helpful and practical theory of management that organizations and churches has been discovering on their own for years.

Each organization, including churches, runs on motives which are directed toward goals. Without goals there are no motives, and things come to a stop. Sometimes the goals are explicit; sometimes they are implicit.

And when the achievement or attainment of these goals is thwarted, you have what is called *frustration*. When this happens, organizational theorists say that this frustration shows itself in a number of ways: aggression, rationalization (excuses), regression, fixation, and resignation. I am sure that you have seen the results of goal frustration yourselves in organizations, in other people, in churches, maybe even in yourself.

And there are several other interesting things about goals. For example, people are not highly motivated if a goal is seen as almost impossible, on one hand, or virtually certain to achieve, on the other hand. The best goals are not too hard or too easy. Of these two, the most common mistake is to set unrealistic, impossible goals, rather than those that are too easy. Then there is frustration, and motivation goes down.

Organizations need success—they need victories—if they are going to thrive.

And so first, there must be a goal, and the best goals are *specific, achievable* and *measurable*. Church growth guru, Lyle Schaller calls this the SAM method. And not having these kinds of goals is simply setting oneself up for a fall.

I believe that the reason why most New Year's resolutions fall flat on their faces is that they are much too vague—they are too long-term, unachievable and not measurable. Then what happens is that there is no sense of success, of achievement. And motivation goes down, and we forget about it until next year.

Another thing about a good goal is that it must be integrated within the organization. For example, the goals of management and the goals of the workers need to be close together for what they call "greater organizational accomplishment."

So let's say that the goals of a parent, representing management, of course, are that her child becomes a rocket scientist and Nobel peace Prize winner. And let's say the child's goals are to wear radical clothes and have plenty of dates. Now, no matter what happens, there is not going to be much "organizational accomplishment." No matters what happens, someone (or both) is going to be unhappy.

Now, all this about goals is important and useful for all organizations: families, businesses, governments. But this is especially important to that unique organization called the church. Why?

Well, first, the church is a completely voluntary organization. Nobody pays anyone to be a church member. There is no coercion, there is no control over its members. They can come and go as they please.

Second, it is a highly democratic organization. We don't have a management who decides what we are going to do, and then have workers who carry it out. In a church, everyone is both management and worker.

So for the church it is particularly important to follow the principles of good goals. And it seems the more we study this areas, the more we realize that Paul knew what he was talking about. A church must know where it is going; it must have goals, and it must move together in harmony as if it were a single entity to accomplish those goals.

In Proverbs it says, "where there is no vision, the people perish." And by vision, I would mean a clear, specific, achievable and measurable vision. It would need to be a common vision, a shared vision, or as the experts might say, a vision for organizational accomplishment.

Look, I know that we are all individuals here. We each have our own goals and vision. But we need more. We cannot afford to have each of us merely fly off in a different direction. It is imperative to have a clear, common vision to move together, to be joined as a single body and knit together. Sure, we have individual lives, but as a church we must work *together*, moving in unison and coordination, as if some invisible hand has choreographed us into a beautiful dance.

I have referred to something that church growth specialist, George Barna, has written that bears repeating:

*In every one of the growing, healthy churches I have studied, a discernable link has been forged between the spiritual and numerical growth of those congregations and the existence, articulation and widespread ownership of God's vision for ministry by the leaders and participants of the church. Conversely, visionless congregations fail to experience spiritual and numerical growth.*

What is a vision? It is a clear, distinctive, unique mental image given to a church. It is like a fingerprint; no two are alike. **"Each church," writes Barna, "has been called into existence to reach a different group of people and to have a unique influence on the culture."**

Lily Tomlin once said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific." As a congregation, we need to be more specific.

**It will take time, but I believe that it is absolutely vital for this congregation to discover and articulate its unique vision.** We have a good start.

I was very encouraged by the work the congregation has done toward its vision and mission statements. Both of these statements have themes that I appreciate, such as "membership growth," "growth risk," "inclusive church family" and "progressive Christian community." This is an excellent start. However, it is just that—a start. I recommend

that we continue with this work toward a cohesive vision. I hope that we will work for greater and greater consensus about who we are and who we want to become. I cannot provide this nor should I. But I can help it emerge.

I would suggest that we work at getting more specific. What does “progressive” mean? What does “inclusive” look like? I would like us to work toward a common understanding. Can we identify the profile of the typical persons we are called to reach?

One component is the Open and Affirming status that this congregation adopted in 1993 for the full, equal and open inclusion of gay and lesbian members in the life and ministry of this church. It’s not our entire vision, but it is an important part of it.

To use Paul’s language in Ephesians, Rincon is not *the* body. We are *a* body that is merely a part of the larger whole. It is a common mistake of a congregation to lose sight of this and to try to “be all things to all people.” The good news is that we don’t have to. There are other congregations, of which we are a part, that we complement and that complement us.

This awareness frees us and makes us more effective. As a congregation we have a finite amount of energy and resources. **The more we can focus our efforts the more successful we will be. If we work at pulling more and more in the same direction, the more effective we will be.** What direction is that? That’s something for us to continue to discover together.

In the morning, my body is not a good example of this. Part of my body wants to go to the kitchen to get some coffee, part of my body wants to go to the bathroom, part of my body wants to go back to bed. Morning is not the most efficient time for me, and it takes a while for things to start working in synch.

When I was in Minnesota, every once in a while I’d hear this loud and brassy honk from overhead, the there they’d be, this flock of geese. Have you ever noticed a flock of geese flying south, how they fly in a “V” formation? There is a reason that they do this. What is interesting is that they can fly a lot further as a group than they can individually—sometimes up to 75% further. They ride each other’s draft and take turns flying in the lead.

The leader drops out and that spot is promptly filled by one that was behind without missing a beat. They share the load. There is cooperation and interdependence. And they honk, as if to give encouragement to keep up their speed and not give up.

I don’t think what they’re saying is “Man, I am not happy right now. I swear, if some things don’t change I am seriously thinking about joining another flock.” No, the English translation is probably, “C’mon. Keep it up! Isn’t this great! Tally Ho!”

And so as a church, we too, need to have a direction, an identity, a destination, a focus that comes to a point like a “V,” if we are going to get where we want to go.

How do they know where they're going? Well it's just not up to whoever is in front at the time. If that were the case they'd just fly in circles, get nowhere or maybe find themselves in Cleveland. No, it is simply given to the whole group—together they discern what it is.

Bob Stromberg once wrote a little piece titled, "Why Geese Fly Farther Than Eagles."

*For though the eagle is stronger in the fight,  
More fit to kill,  
My goose can fly farther and longer  
Than any eagle will.*

He had a chance to observe them closely when he nursed one injured goose back to health. He wrote,

*So that's how I found out  
How the goose can fly from up north  
To way down south and back again.  
But she cannot do it alone, you see.  
It's something that must be done in community.*

*These days it's a popular notion,  
And people think of themselves on the eagle-side.  
Solitary,  
Self-sufficient,  
Strong.*

*But we are what we are.  
That's something we cannot choose.  
Through many would wish to be seen as an eagle,  
I think God made most like the goose.*

**So let us not be a congregation of eagles. Let us be a congregation of geese.** Let us discover our vision and follow it together. Because you see, this is how we can go a great distance as a congregation.

So come on, let's get together; we have a long way to go. Tally ho!