December 22, 2016 *Will the circle be unbroken?*  Milepost 236

A decentralized structure and approach to ministry can function well in a steady, predictable, relatively crisis free context. Many options for programs from which one receives, and many options for serving, creates likelihood for high contentment. This approach fosters the creation of additional options, which fit in well as long as they don’t require congregation wide support to function. Several more have been added during transition.

Like the family table, there’s always room for one more. But that works at the family table, because children eventually leave. One can’t keep adding indefinitely, without some subtraction (or a bigger table).

Shalom’s table is full of many good things, perhaps too full for its size. In attempting to schedule a new small group to meet a specific spiritual growth need, we found virtually the only option was Friday night. (In all my years of ministry, Friday night has always been off the table!) I see two dynamics at play: members really desire this focus, and schedules are full.

In such a context, vision can be seen as creating one more dish for an already full table. I believe that’s a factor in what happened with the outreach conversations.

Leaders keep track of the entire table. They don’t decide what dish to eliminate when another is added, but they do name reality: *The table’s full! What are we going to do about it?* Decentralization results in an abundant selection in each category (salads, entrée’s, bread, fruit, dessert), but each category tends to only be concerned about space for their priority.

Without a guiding vision, each new opportunity tends to be discerned through political efforts: who thinks it’s a good idea, and who doesn’t? As with politics, this often results in winners and losers. With a clear vision, good ideas can be weighed against the vision. Some good ideas

will result in: “though it’s a good idea, it doesn’t help us toward our vision.”

Uniting behind a common vision means change. New priorities require that less attention be given to some existing priorities. An assumption that all is well, and nothing should or can change, makes vision work difficult. Decentralization makes it difficult to come to agreement that not all is well.

-Gary Martin